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**JACK LONDON
AMY LOWELL
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JACK LONDON AS TITAN.

by L. S. Friedland, *The Dial* 1/25/1917

They tell us that Xanthippe, the very firm wife of Socrates, could never understand the reason for her husband's fame in Athens. At home he was sufficiently meek and domestic, and his patented method for getting the better of an argument didn't work there. He received scant honor in his own household. After all, he was only a husband, and there were a great many husbands. In the same way, Jack London, who is rejected by the literary elite in his own country, has been hailed as a mighty prophet in Russia. A few years ago a Russian critic said, "Nowadays, all the adult population of Russia is reading Jack London." And lectures were given on his works, articles written ; his complete works were issued by two publishing houses, and many other translations appeared. Jack London became the vogue in Russia. It is interesting to notice that all this happened in those agitated days when the Russian intellectuals were being aroused to a strange ! fervor by Gorky, the exponent of individualism, of the strong man whose life might be consumed in the performance of one heroic and mighty deed,— but the deed would be done. And the intellectuals began to worship action, power, personality, that compelling force of character which projects ideas and thoughts into the outer reality of deeds. Jack London's heroes were men of this type. They had a virile and unquenchable thirst for adventure; they were big, fresh, and inventive creatures of a New World of action and enterprise; they were fascinating vikings to

the fervent, hectic, impractical intellectuals of Russia.

One of the first in Russia to hail Jack London as a writer of unusual talent was Leonid Andreyev, the well-known dramatist and author of short-stories. He calls Jack London the representative of the Anglo-Saxon race, the strong manly race, "the race of doers." He finds in the American author a talent and will directed toward the affirmation of life :

London has a glorious place among the strong ones. His talent is organic, like good blood, fresh and strong. His inventiveness is rich, his experience enormous and personal, like that of Kipling or Upton Sinclair. . . You read him, and it is as though you leave some narrow lane and find yourself amid the broad expanse of the sea, breathe in salt air, and you feel your muscles growing stronger, and hear the imperious call of an ever primitive life to work and struggle. . . The enemy of impotence and decrepitude, of fruitless lamentation and pity,— under the sour mask of which is hidden an absence of will to live and struggle,— Jack London calmly buries the dead, making straight the road for the living,— that is why his funerals are as gay as a wedding. He is of the race of men who subject chaos to will, and turn outcries into songs.

On the other hand, a Russian critic, K. Chukovsky, holds that London has been greatly overrated. He passes a delightful judgment on the American writer, calling him "A Yankee, a salesman in a derby, playing Zarathustra or Byron, and dealing in oceans, tempests, Lucifers, prairies. Working for the firm of 'Struggle and Elemental Powers' he forces upon us all kinds of shop-worn stuff which has been lying about on the European market since the days of Chateaubriand."

But Kuprin, a great novelist and realist, in his "Note on Jack London," ranks the American with Kipling, finds him an original and highly talented writer, whose chief qualities are simplicity, clarity, untamed force of poetic conception, and manly beauty of style.

In the same strain, an eminent Russian critic, Kranichfeld, accounts for the Russian delight in Jack London by the quality of his art, "the living nerve of which is the pathos of struggling." Kranichfeld contrasts London's vigorous art with the moody, despairing spirit of modern Russian literature. But the Russian critics are united in the belief that all the distinctive qualities of London's art and style are truly American.

According to Chukovsky he is "the poet of the fist," and another Russian, Volsky, writes: "Dark, devious passion is the business of old Europe; the American is enamored of force. Primitive love, primitive hate, stubborn will, the storming of life, inability to generalize and a distrust of generalization — such is Jack London, for such is America. "

Praise so bewildering and unwarranted will scarcely disturb even those Americans who remember our strange neglect of Poe during the days when Europe was crowning him true poet. Yet how can one be reconciled to the preposterous mating of Jack London, Kipling, and Upton Sinclair ? We must remember that this is not the personal judgment of one eminent Russian. As we have seen, Kuprin, who, next to Gorky, is the greatest of the living writers of Russia, couples London with Kipling in the calm, assured manner of one saying the most natural thing in the world. I have heard Russians group Jack London with Kipling (and Upton Sinclair) so many times,

that I have almost recovered from the first bewilderment occasioned by the comparison. But this verdict of fairly representative Russian critics is more than an entertaining side light on foreign opinion of American literature. It means that when a critic crosses the boundary and carries with him his native standards, he will inevitably go astray. But it means, too, that if we can learn to know foreign standards of critical measurement, our reward will be not only a deeper insight into the alien literature, but also an "illumined" desire for more patient and earnest searching of our own.

In the case of Russian criticism it is necessary to remember that, since the days of the critics Chernuishevski, Pisarev, and Bielski, the test of a work of art has been: "Does it explain life? does it pass an opinion on life — the life of our own day?" Esthetic qualities — verbal magic, artistic shaping, inevitableness of form, purgation of superfluities — are to the Russian intellectuals merely extraneous, secondary, and of very little moment. Pisarev expresses the idea with impatient and quite uncritical dogmatism: "A poet must be either a Titan who shakes to the very foundation mountains of evil, or else a worm crawling in the dust. There is nothing between — except clowns to amuse fools." So that the Russian looks to literature for social programmes; for solutions to the "accursed problems of life." In such a work as Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle," the Russian intellectual hails an attempt to shake "to the very foundation mountains of evil." He is stirred by its tremendous earnestness,— by its brave attack on something evil in the "existing order," an outspoken attack, mind you, not a

guarded one! It is a protest, a manifesto, a "social document." It must be discussed,— it is a great work of art. With the same uncritical naivete the intelligentsia couple Jack London with Kipling. Both, say the Russians, are valiant explorers on the illimitable plain of life — one in India, the other in Alaska. Both are creators of manly men, powerful in action and the storming of obstacles. And just as Artsibashev, brooding, diseased, robbed of strength and vitality, portrays the passionate, self-centred, "superbly sexed" man, so the Russian intellectuals pay homage to a masculine effrontery, a stern assertiveness, which they lack and most long for. And strong desire is never critical ; its eyes are lacking in discernment.

There is something pathetic in the "realism" of the Russian intellectuals,— in their renunciation of beauty, shapeliness, and idealization because of the grim resolve never to cease combating ugliness, distortion, and evil, until these shall be no more. But more tragic is that strange twist in their "idealism" which makes them identify life with visible action and outer victory, with the superman,— brief master of all but himself. They have not fathomed the full meaning of Gorky's words: "All of a man's life may be consumed in the doing of one deed, but that deed must be beautiful, splendid, free." Perhaps the Russian intellectuals of to-day — and not they alone — have yet to learn that for the finding of such deeds men will need a balance and sanity, an inner health and nobility for which the hurried superman of action has no time to wait.

THE MAN WITH THE GASH

from the Internet Archive etext of *The God of His Fathers
And Other Stories* by Jack London

JACOB KENT had suffered from cupidity all the days of his life. This, in turn, had engendered a chronic distrustfulness, and his mind and character had become so warped that he was a very disagreeable man to deal with. He was also a victim to somnambulist propensities, and very set in his ideas. He had been a weaver of cloth from the cradle, until the fever of Klondike had entered his blood and torn him away from his loom. His cabin stood midway between Sixty Mile Post and the Stuart River ; and men who made it a custom to travel the trail to Dawson, likened him to a robber baron, perched in his fortress and exacting toll from the caravans that used his ill-kept roads. Since a certain amount of history was required in the construction of this figure, the less cultured wayfarers from Stuart River were prone to describe him after a still more primordial fashion, in which a command of strong adjectives was to be chiefly noted.

This cabin was not his, by the way, having been built several years previously by a couple of miners who had got out a raft of logs at that point for a grub-stake. They had been most hospitable lads, and, after they abandoned it, travelers who knew the route made it an object to arrive there at nightfall. It was very handy, saving them all the time and toil of pitching camp ; and it was an unwritten rule that the last man left a neat pile of firewood for the next comer. Rarely a night passed but from half a dozen to

a score of men crowded into its shelter. Jacob Kent noted these things, exercised squatter sovereignty, and moved in. Thenceforth, the weary travelers were mulcted a dollar per head for the privilege of sleeping on the floor, Jacob Kent weighing the dust and never failing to steal the down-weight. Besides, he so contrived that his transient guests chopped his wood for him and carried his water. This was rank piracy, but his victims were an easy-going breed, and while they detested him, they yet permitted him to flourish in his sins.

One afternoon in April he sat by his door, for all the world like a predatory spider, marvelling at the heat of the returning sun, and keeping an eye on the trail for prospective flies. The Yukon lay at his feet, a sea of ice, disappearing around two great bends to the north and south, and stretching an honest two miles from bank to bank. Over its rough breast ran the sled-trail, a slender sunken line, eighteen inches wide and two thousand miles in length, with more curses distributed to the linear foot than any other road in or out of all Christendom.

Jacob Kent was feeling particularly good that afternoon. The record had been broken the previous night, and he had sold his hospitality to no less than twenty-eight visitors. True, it had been quite uncomfortable, and four had snored beneath his bunk all night ; but then it had added appreciable weight to the sack in which he kept his gold dust. That sack, with its glittering yellow treasure, was at once the chief delight and the chief bane of his existence. Heaven and hell lay within its slender mouth. In the nature of things, there being no privacy to his one-roomed dwelling, he was tortured by a constant

fear of theft. It would be very easy for these bearded, desperate-looking strangers to make away with it. Often he dreamed that such was the case, and awoke in the grip of nightmare. A select number of these robbers haunted him through his dreams, and he came to know them quite well, especially the bronzed leader with the gash on his right cheek. This fellow was the most persistent of the lot, and, because of him, he had, in his waking moments, constructed several score of hiding-places in and about the cabin. After a concealment he would breathe freely again, perhaps for several nights, only to collar the Man with the Gash in the very act of unearthing the sack. Then, on awakening in the midst of the usual struggle, he would at once get up and transfer the bag to a new and more ingenious crypt. It was not that he was the direct victim of these phantasms ; but he believed in omens and thought-transference, and he deemed these dream-robbers to be the astral projection of real personages who happened at those particular moments, no matter where they were in the flesh, to be harboring designs, in the spirit, upon his wealth. So he continued to bleed the unfortunates who crossed his threshold, and at the same time to add to his trouble with every ounce that went into the sack.

As he sat sunning himself, a thought came to Jacob Kent that brought him to his feet with a jerk. The pleasures of life had culminated in the continual weighing and reweighing of his dust; but a shadow had been thrown upon this pleasant avocation, which he had hitherto failed to brush aside. His gold-scales were quite small ; in fact, their maximum was a pound and a half, eighteen ounces, while his hoard mounted up to something like three and a third times that.

He had never been able to weigh it all at one operation, and hence considered himself to have been shut out from a new and most edifying coign of contemplation. Being denied this, half the pleasure of possession had been lost ; nay, he felt that this miserable obstacle actually minimized the fact, as it did the strength, of possession. It was the solution of this problem flashing across his mind that had just brought him to his feet. He searched the trail carefully in either direction. There was nothing in sight, so he went inside.

In a few seconds he had the table cleared away and the scales set up. On one side he placed the stamped disks to the equivalent of fifteen ounces, and balanced it with dust on the other. Replacing the weights with dust, he then had thirty ounces precisely balanced. These, in turn, he placed together on one side and again balanced with more dust. By this time the gold was exhausted, and he was sweating liberally. He trembled with ecstasy, ravished beyond measure. Nevertheless he dusted the sack thoroughly, to the last least grain, till the balance was overcome and one side of the scales sank to the table. Equilibrium, however, was restored by the addition of a pennyweight and five grains to the opposite side. He stood, head thrown back, transfixed. The sack was empty, but the potentiality of the scales had become immeasurable. Upon them he could weigh any amount, from the tiniest grain to pounds upon pounds. Mammon laid hot fingers on his heart. The sun swung on its westering way till it flashed through the open doorway, full upon the yellow-burdened scales. The precious heaps, like the golden breasts of a bronze Cleopatra, flung back the light in a mellow glow. Time and space were not.

" Gawd blime me ! but you 'ave the makin' of several quid there, 'aven't you ? "

Jacob Kent wheeled about, at the same time reaching for his double-barrelled shot-gun, which stood handy. But when his eyes lit on the intruder's face, he staggered back dizzily. It was the face of the Man with the Gash !

The man looked at him curiously.

" Oh, that 's all right," he said, waving his hand deprecatingly. " You need n't think as I 'll 'arm you or your blasted dust.

" You 're a rum 'un, you are," he added reflectively, as he watched the sweat pouring from off Kent's face and the quavering of his knees.

" Wy don't you pipe up an' say somethin' ? " he went on, as the other struggled for breath.

" Wot 's gone wrong o' your gaff? Anythink the matter?"

"W w where 'd you get it ? " Kent at last managed to articulate, raising a shaking forefinger to the ghastly scar which seamed the other's cheek.

"Shipmate stove me down with a marlin-spike from the main-royal. An' now as you 'ave your figger'ead in trim, wot I want to know is, wot 's it to you ? That 's wot I want to know wot 's it to you ? Gawd blime me ! do it 'urt you ? Ain't it smug enough for the likes o' you ? That 's wot I want to know ! "

"No, no," Kent answered, sinking upon a stool with a sickly grin. u I was just wondering."

" Did you ever see the like ? " the other went on truculently.

"No."

" Ain't it a beute ? "

" Yes." Kent nodded his head approvingly, intent on humoring this strange visitor, but wholly unprepared for the outburst which was to follow his effort to be agreeable.

" You blasted, bloomin', burgoo-eatin' son-of-a-sea-swab ! Wot do you mean, a sayin' the most onsigthly thing Gawd Almighty ever put on the face o' man is a beute ? Wot do you mean, you "

And thereat this fiery son of the sea broke off into a string of Oriental profanity, mingling gods and devils, lineages and men, metaphors and monsters, with so savage a virility that Jacob Kent was paralyzed. He shrank back, his arms lifted as though to ward off physical violence. So utterly unnerved was he that the other paused in the mid-swing of a gorgeous peroration and burst into thunderous laughter.

"The sun 's knocked the bottom out o' the trail," said the Man with the Gash, between departing paroxysms of mirth. " An' I only 'ope as you 'I I appreciate the hoppertunity of consortin' with a man o' my mug. Get steam up in that fire-box o' your'n. I 'm goin' to unrig the dogs an' grub 'em. An' don't be shy o' the wood, my lad j there 's plenty more where that come from, and it 's you 've got the time to sling an axe. An' tote up a bucket o' water while you 're about it. Lively ! or I 'I I run you down, so 'elp me ! " Such a thing was unheard of. Jacob Kent was making the fire, chopping wood, packing water doing menial tasks for a guest ! When Jim Cardegee left Dawson, it was with his head filled with the iniquities of this roadside Shylock ; and all along the trail his numerous victims had added to the sum of his crimes. Now, Jim Cardegee,

with the sailor's love for a sailor's joke, had determined, when he pulled into the cabin, to bring its inmate down a peg or so. That he had succeeded beyond expectation he could not help but remark, though he was in the dark as to the part the gash on his cheek had played in it. But while he could not understand, he saw the terror it created, and resolved to exploit it as remorselessly as would any modern trader a choice bit of merchandise.

" Strike me blind, but you 're a 'ustler," he said admiringly, his head cocked to one side, as his host bustled about. " You never 'ort to 'ave gone Klondiking. It 's the keeper of a pub' you was laid out for. An' it 's often as I 'ave 'card the lads up an' down the river speak o' you, but I 'ad n't no idea you was so jolly nice."

Jacob Kent experienced a tremendous yearning to try his shotgun on him, but the fascination of the gash was too potent. This was the real Man with the Gash, the man who had so often robbed him in the spirit. This, then, was the embodied entity of the being whose astral form had been projected into his dreams, the man who had so frequently harbored designs against his hoard ; hence there could be no other conclusion this Man with the Gash had now come in the flesh to dispossess him. And that gash ! He could no more keep his eyes from it than stop the beating of his heart. Try as he would, they wandered back to that one point as inevitably as the needle to the pole.

" Do it 'urt you ? " Jim Cardeggee thundered suddenly, looking up from the spreading of his blankets and encountering the rapt gaze of the

other. " It strikes me as 'ow it 'ud be the proper thing for you to draw your jib, douse the glim, an' turn in, seein' as 'ow it worrits you. Jes* lay to that, you swab, or so 'elp me I 'I I take a pull on your peak-purchases ! "

Kent was so nervous that it took three puff's to blow out the slush-lamp, and he crawled into his blankets without even removing his moccasins. The sailor was soon snoring lustily from his hard bed on the floor, but Kent lay staring up into the blackness, one hand on the shotgun, resolved not to close his eyes the whole night. He had not had an opportunity to secrete his five pounds of gold, and it lay in the ammunition box at the head of his bunk. But, try as he would, he at last dozed off with the weight of his dust heavy on his soul. Had he not inadvertently fallen asleep with his mind in such condition, the somnambulic demon would not have been invoked, nor would Jim Cardegee have gone mining next day with a dish-pan.

The fire fought a losing battle, and at last died away, while the frost penetrated the mossy chinks between the logs and chilled the inner atmosphere. The dogs outside ceased their howling, and, curled up in the snow, dreamed of salmon-stocked heavens where dog-drivers and kindred task-masters were not. Within, the sailor lay like a log, while his host tossed restlessly about, the victim of strange fantasies. As midnight drew, near he suddenly threw off the blankets and got up. It was remarkable that he could do what he then did without ever striking a light. Perhaps it was because of the darkness that he kept his eyes shut, and perhaps it was for fear he would see the terrible gash on the cheek of his visitor ; but, be jhis as it may, it is a fact that, unseeing, he opened his ammunition box, put a heavy charge

into the muzzle of the shotgun without spilling a particle, rammed it down with double wads, and then put everything away and got back into bed. Just as daylight laid its steel-gray fingers on the parchment window, Jacob Kent awoke. Turning on his elbow, he raised the lid and peered into the ammunition box. Whatever he saw, or whatever he did not see, exercised a very peculiar effect upon him, considering his neurotic temperament. He glanced at the sleeping man on the floor, let the lid down gently, and rolled over on his back. It was an unwonted calm that rested on his face. Not a muscle quivered. There was not the least sign of excitement or perturbation. He lay there a long while, thinking, and when he got up and began to move about, it was in a cool, collected manner, without noise and without hurry.

It happened that a heavy wooden peg had been driven into the ridge-pole just above Jim Cardegee's head. Jacob Kent, working softly, ran a piece of half-inch manila over it, bringing both ends to the ground. One end he tied about his waist, and in the other he rove a running noose. Then he cocked his shotgun and laid it within reach, by the side of numerous moose-hide thongs. By an effort of will he bore the sight of the scar, slipped the noose over the sleeper's head, and drew it taut by throwing back on his weight, at the same time seizing the gun and bringing it to bear.

Jim Cardegee awoke, choking, bewildered, staring down the twin wells of steel.
u Where is it ? " Kent asked, at the same time slacking on the rope.

" You blasted *ugh* "

Kent merely threw back his weight, shutting off the other's wind.

" Bloomin' Bur ough "

" Where is it ? " Kent repeated.

" Wot ? " Cardeggee asked, as soon as he had caught his breath.

" The gold-dust."

" Wot gold-dust ? " the perplexed sailor demanded.

" You know well enough, mine."

" Ain't seen nothink of it. Wot do ye take me for ? A safe-deposit ? Wot 'ave I got to do with it, any'ow ? "

" Mebbe you know, and mebbe you don't know, but anyway, I 'm going to stop your breath till you do know. And if you lift a hand, I'll blow your head off!"

" Vast heavin' ! " Cardeggee roared, as the rope tightened.

Kent eased away a moment, and the sailor, wriggling his neck as though from the pressure, managed to loosen the noose a bit and work it up so the point of contact was just under the chin.

" Well ? " Kent questioned, expecting the disclosure.

But Cardeggee grinned. u Go ahead with your 'angin', you bloomin* old pot-wolloper ! " Then, as the sailor had anticipated, the tragedy became a farce. Cardeggee being the heavier of the two, Kent, throwing his body backward and

down, could not lift him clear of the ground. Strain and strive to the uttermost, the sailor's feet still stuck to the floor and sustained a part of his weight. The remaining portion was supported by the point of contact just under his chin. Failing to swing him clear, Kent clung on, resolved to slowly throttle him or force him to tell what he had done with the hoard. But the Man with the Gash would not throttle. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and at the end of that time, in despair, Kent let his prisoner down. " Well," he remarked, wiping away the sweat, " if you won't hang you 'I I shoot. Some men was n't born to be hanged, anyway." " An' it 's a pretty mess as you 'I I make o' this 'ere cabin floor." Cardegee was fighting for time. u Now, look 'ere, I 'I I tell you wot we do ; we 'I I lay our 'eads 'longside an' reason together. You 've lost some dust. You say as 'ow I know, an' I say as 'ow I don't. Let 's get a hobservation an' shape a course "

" Vast heavin* ! " Kent dashed in, maliciously imitating the other's enunciation. " I 'm going to shape all the courses of this shebang, and you observe ; and if you do anything more, I 'I I bore you as sure as Moses ! "

" For the sake of my mother "

" Whom God have mercy upon if she loves you. Ah ! Would you ? " He frustrated a hostile move on the part of the other by pressing the cold muzzle against his forehead. u Lay quiet, now ! If you lift as much as a hair, you 'I I get it."

It was rather an awkward task, with the trigger of the gun always within pulling distance of the finger; but Kent was a weaver, and in a few minutes had the sailor tied hand and foot. Then he dragged him without and laid him by

the side of the cabin, where he could overlook the river and watch the sun climb to the meridian. " Now I 'I I give you till noon, and then " "Wot?"

" You 'I I be hitting the brimstone trail. But if you speak up, I 'I I keep you till the next bunch of mounted police come by."

"Well, Gawd blime me, if this ain't a go ! 'Ere I be, innercent as a lamb, an' 'ere you be, lost all o' your top 'amper an' out o' your reckonin', run me foul an' goin' to rake me into 'ell-fire. You bloomin' old pirut ! You " Jim Cardegee loosed the strings of his profanity and fairly outdid himself. Jacob Kent brought out a stool that he might enjoy it in comfort. Having exhausted all the possible combinations of his vocabulary, the sailor quieted down to hard thinking, his eyes constantly gauging the progress of the sun, which tore up the eastern slope of the heavens with unseemly haste. His dogs, surprised that they had not long since been put to harness, crowded around him. His helplessness appealed to the brutes. They felt that something was wrong, though they knew not what, and they crowded about, howling their mournful sympathy.

" Chook ! Mush-on ! you Siwashes ! " he cried, attempting, in a vermicular way, to kick at them, and discovering himself to be tottering on the edge of a declivity. As soon as the animals had scattered, he devoted himself to the significance of that declivity which he felt to be there but could not see. Nor was he long in arriving at a correct conclusion. In the nature of things, he figured, man is lazy. He does no more than he has to. When he builds a cabin he must put

dirt on the roof. From these premises it was logical that he should carry that dirt no further than was absolutely necessary. Therefore, he lay upon the edge of the hole from which the dirt had been taken to roof Jacob Kent's cabin. This knowledge, properly utilized, might prolong things, he thought ; and he then turned his attention to the moose-hide thongs which bound him. His hands were tied behind him, and pressing against the snow, they were wet with the contact. This moistening of the raw-hide he knew would tend to make it stretch, and, without apparent effort, he endeavored to stretch it more and more.

He watched the trail hungrily, and when in the direction of Sixty Mile a dark speck appeared for a moment against the white background of an ice-jam, he cast an anxious eye at the sun. It had climbed nearly to the zenith. Now and again he caught the black speck clearing the hills of ice and sinking into the intervening hollows ; but he dared not permit himself more than the most cursory glances for fear of rousing his enemy's suspicion. Once, when Jacob Kent rose to his feet and searched the trail with care, Cardeggee was frightened, but the dog-sled had struck a piece of trail running parallel with a jam, and remained out of sight till the danger was past.

" I ' I I see you 'ung for this," Cardeggee threatened, attempting to draw the other's attention. " An' you ' I I rot in 'ell, jes' you see if you don't.

" I say," he cried, after another pause ; " d' ye b'lieve in ghosts ? " Kent's sudden start made him sure of his ground, and he went on : " Now a ghost 'as the right to 'aunt a man wot don't do wot he says ; and you can't shuffle me off till eight bells wot I mean is twelve o'clock can you ?

'Cos if you do, it ' I I 'appen as 'ow I ' I I 'aunt you.

D 'ye 'ear ? A minute, a second too quick, an'
I 'I I 'aunt you, so 'elp me, I will ! "
Jacob Kent looked dubious, but declined to talk.
"Ow's your chronometer? Wot 's your longi-
tude ? 'Ow do you know as your time 's cor-
rect ? " Cardegee persisted, vainly hoping to beat
his executioner out of a few minutes. "Is it
Barrack's time you 'ave, or is. it the Company
time ? 'Cos if you do it before the stroke o'
the bell, I 'I I not rest. I give you fair warnin'.

I 'I I come back. An' if you 'ave n't the time, 'ow
will you know? That's wot I want 'ow will
you tell ? "

" I 'I I send you off all right," Kent replied.

" Got a sun-dial here."

" No good. Thirty-two degrees variation o' the
needle."

" Stakes are all set."

" 'Ow did you set 'em ? Compass ? "

" No ; lined them up with the North Star."

" Sure ? "

" Sure."

Cardegee groaned, then stole a glance at the
trail. The sled was just clearing a rise, barely a
mile away, and the dogs were in full lope, running
lightly.

'Ow close is the shadows to the line ? "

Kent walked to the primitive timepiece and studied it. " Three inches," he announced, after a careful survey.

"Say, jes' sing out c eight bells ' afore you pull the gun, will you ? "

Kent agreed, and they lapsed into silence. The thongs about Cardeggee's wrists were slowly stretching, and he had begun to work them over his hands.

" Say, 'ow close is the shadows ? "
" One inch."

The sailor wriggled slightly to assure himself that he would topple over at the right moment, and slipped the first turn over his hands.
" 'Ow close ? "

" Half an inch." Just then Kent heard the jarring churn of the runners and turned his eyes to the trail. The driver was lying flat on the sled and the dogs swinging down the straight stretch to the cabin. Kent whirled back, bringing his rifle to shoulder.

" It ain't eight bells yet ! " Cardeggee expostulated. " I 'll 'aunt you, sure ! "

Jacob Kent faltered. He was standing by the sun-dial, perhaps ten paces from his victim. The man on the sled must have seen that something unusual was taking place, for he had risen to his knees, his whip singing viciously among the dogs.

The shadows swept into line. Kent looked along the sights.

" Make ready ! " he commanded solemnly. " Eight
b-- "

But just a fraction of a second too soon, Car-
degee rolled backward into the hole. Kent held
his fire and ran to the edge. Bang ! The gun
exploded full in the sailor's face as he rose to his
feet. But no smoke came from the muzzle;
instead, a sheet of flame burst from the side of the
barrel near its butt, and Jacob Kent went down.

The dogs dashed up the bank, dragging the sled
over his body, and the driver sprang off as Jim

Cardegee freed his hands and drew himself from
the hole.

" Jim ! " The new-comer recognized him.

"What's the matter?"

" Wot 's the matter ? Oh, nothink at all. It
jest 'appens as I do little things like this for my
'ealth. Wot 's the matter, you bloomin' idjit ?
Wot's the matter, eh? Cast me loose or I'll
show you wot ! 'Urry up, or I 'l l 'olystone the
decks with you ! "

" Huh ! " he added, as the other went to work
with his sheath-knife. " Wot 's the matter ? I
want to know. Jes' tell me that, will you, wot 's
the matter ? Hey ? "

Kent was quite dead when they rolled him
over. The gun, an old-fashioned, heavy-weighted
muzzle-loader, lay near him. Steel and wood had
parted company. Near the butt of the right-hand
barrel, with lips pressed outward, gaped a fissure
several inches in length. The sailor picked it up,

curiously. A glittering stream of yellow dust ran out through the crack. The facts of the case dawned upon Jim Cardegee.

" Strike me standin' ! " he roared ; " 'ere 's a go ! 'Ere 's 'is bloomin' dust ! Gawd blime me, an' you, too, Charley, if you don't run an' get the dish-pan ! "

YELLOW HANDKERCHIEF

The Project Gutenberg eBook, *Tales of the Fish Patrol*, by Jack London

"I'M not wanting to dictate to you, lad," Charley said; "but I'm very much against your making a last raid. You've gone safely through rough times with rough men, and it would be a shame to have something happen to you at the very end."

"But how can I get out of making a last raid?" I demanded, with the cocksureness of youth. "There always has to be a last, you know, to anything."

Charley crossed his legs, leaned back, and considered the problem. "Very true. But why not call the capture of Demetrios Contos the last? You're back from it safe and sound and hearty, for all your good wetting, and—and—" His voice broke and he could not speak for a moment. "And I could never forgive myself if anything happened to you now."

I laughed at Charley's fears while I gave in to the claims of his affection, and agreed to consider the last raid already performed. We had been together for two years, and now I was leaving the fish patrol in order to go back and finish my education. I had earned and saved money to put me through three years at the high school, and though the beginning of the term was several months away, I intended doing a lot of studying for the entrance examinations.

My belongings were packed snugly in a sea-chest, and I was all ready to buy my ticket and ride down on the train to Oakland, when Neil Partington

arrived in Benicia. The _Reindeer_ was needed immediately for work far down on the Lower Bay, and Neil said he intended to run straight for Oakland. As that was his home and as I was to live with his family while going to school, he saw no reason, he said, why I should not put my chest aboard and come along.

So the chest went aboard, and in the middle of the afternoon we hoisted the _Reindeer's_ big mainsail and cast off. It was tantalizing fall weather. The sea-breeze, which had blown steadily all summer, was gone, and in its place were capricious winds and murky skies which made the time of arriving anywhere extremely problematical. We started on the first of the ebb, and as we slipped down the Carquinez Straits, I looked my last for some time upon Benicia and the bight at Turner's Shipyard, where we had besieged the _Lancashire Queen_, and had captured Big Alec, the King of the Greeks. And at the mouth of the Straits I looked with not a little interest upon the spot where a few days before I should have drowned but for the good that was in the nature of Demetrios Contos.

A great wall of fog advanced across San Pablo Bay to meet us, and in a few minutes the _Reindeer_ was running blindly through the damp obscurity. Charley, who was steering, seemed to have an instinct for that kind of work. How he did it, he himself confessed that he did not know; but he had a way of calculating winds, currents, distance, time, drift, and sailing speed that was truly marvellous.

"It looks as though it were lifting," Neil Partington said, a couple of hours after we had entered the fog. "Where do you say we are, Charley?"

Charley looked at his watch, "Six o'clock, and three hours more of ebb," he remarked casually.

"But where do you say we are?" Neil insisted.

Charley pondered a moment, and then answered, "The tide has edged us over a bit out of our course, but if the fog lifts right now, as it is going to lift, you'll find we're not more than a thousand miles off McNear's Landing."

"You might be a little more definite by a few miles, anyway," Neil

grumbled, showing by his tone that he disagreed.

“All right, then,” Charley said, conclusively, “not less than a quarter of a mile, not more than a half.”

The wind freshened with a couple of little puffs, and the fog thinned perceptibly.

“McNear’s is right off there,” Charley said, pointing directly into the fog on our weather beam.

The three of us were peering intently in that direction, when the _Reindeer_ struck with a dull crash and came to a standstill. We ran forward, and found her bowsprit entangled in the tanned rigging of a short, chunky mast. She had collided, head on, with a Chinese junk lying at anchor.

At the moment we arrived forward, five Chinese, like so many bees, came swarming out of the little ’tween-decks cabin, the sleep still in their eyes.

Leading them came a big, muscular man, conspicuous for his pock-marked face and the yellow silk handkerchief swathed about his head. It was Yellow Handkerchief, the Chinaman whom we had arrested for illegal shrimp-fishing the year before, and who, at that time, had nearly sunk the _Reindeer_, as he had nearly sunk it now by violating the rules of navigation.

“What d’ye mean, you yellow-faced heathen, lying here in a fairway without a horn a-going?” Charley cried hotly.

“Mean?” Neil calmly answered. “Just take a look—that’s what he means.”

Our eyes followed the direction indicated by Neil’s finger, and we saw the open amidships of the junk, half filled, as we found on closer examination, with fresh-caught shrimps. Mingled with the shrimps were myriads of small fish, from a quarter of an inch upward in size.

Yellow Handkerchief had lifted the trap-net at high-water slack, and,

taking advantage of the concealment offered by the fog, had boldly been lying by, waiting to lift the net again at low-water slack.

“Well,” Neil hummed and hawed, “in all my varied and extensive experience as a fish patrolman, I must say this is the easiest capture I ever made. What’ll we do with them, Charley?”

“Tow the junk into San Rafael, of course,” came the answer. Charley turned to me. “You stand by the junk, lad, and I’ll pass you a towing line. If the wind doesn’t fail us, we’ll make the creek before the tide gets too low, sleep at San Rafael, and arrive in Oakland to-morrow by midday.”

So saying, Charley and Neil returned to the Reindeer and got under way, the junk towing astern. I went aft and took charge of the prize, steering by means of an antiquated tiller and a rudder with large, diamond-shaped holes, through which the water rushed back and forth.

By now the last of the fog had vanished, and Charley’s estimate of our position was confirmed by the sight of McNear’s Landing a short half-mile away. Following along the west shore, we rounded Point Pedro in plain view of the Chinese shrimp villages, and a great to-do was raised when they saw one of their junks towing behind the familiar fish patrol sloop.

The wind, coming off the land, was rather puffy and uncertain, and it would have been more to our advantage had it been stronger. San Rafael Creek, up which we had to go to reach the town and turn over our prisoners to the authorities, ran through wide-stretching marshes, and was difficult to navigate on a falling tide, while at low tide it was impossible to navigate at all. So, with the tide already half-ebbed, it was necessary for us to make time. This the heavy junk prevented, lumbering along behind and holding the Reindeer back by just so much dead weight.

“Tell those coolies to get up that sail,” Charley finally called to me. “We don’t want to hang up on the mud flats for the rest of the night.”

I repeated the order to Yellow Handkerchief, who mumbled it huskily to his men. He was suffering from a bad cold, which doubled him up in

convulsive coughing spells and made his eyes heavy and bloodshot. This made him more evil-looking than ever, and when he glared viciously at me I remembered with a shiver the close shave I had had with him at the time of his previous arrest.

His crew sullenly tailed on to the halyards, and the strange, outlandish sail, lateen in rig and dyed a warm brown, rose in the air. We were sailing on the wind, and when Yellow Handkerchief flattened down the sheet the junk forged ahead and the tow-line went slack. Fast as the _Reindeer_ could sail, the junk outsailed her; and to avoid running her down I hauled a little closer on the wind. But the junk likewise outpointed, and in a couple of minutes I was abreast of the _Reindeer_ and to windward. The tow-line had now tautened, at right angles to the two boats, and the predicament was laughable.

“Cast off!” I shouted.

Charley hesitated.

“It’s all right,” I added. “Nothing can happen. We’ll make the creek on this tack, and you’ll be right behind me all the way up to San Rafael.”

At this Charley cast off, and Yellow Handkerchief sent one of his men forward to haul in the line. In the gathering darkness I could just make out the mouth of San Rafael Creek, and by the time we entered it I could barely see its banks. The _Reindeer_ was fully five minutes astern, and we continued to leave her astern as we beat up the narrow, winding channel. With Charley behind us, it seemed I had little to fear from my five prisoners; but the darkness prevented my keeping a sharp eye on them, so I transferred my revolver from my trousers pocket to the side pocket of my coat, where I could more quickly put my hand on it.

Yellow Handkerchief was the one I feared, and that he knew it and made use of it, subsequent events will show. He was sitting a few feet away from me, on what then happened to be the weather side of the junk. I could scarcely see the outlines of his form, but I soon became convinced that he was slowly, very slowly, edging closer to me. I watched him carefully. Steering with my left hand, I slipped my right into my pocket and got hold of the revolver.

I saw him shift along for a couple of inches, and I was just about to order him back—the words were trembling on the tip of my tongue—when I was struck with great force by a heavy figure that had leaped through the air upon me from the lee side. It was one of the crew. He pinioned my right arm so that I could not withdraw my hand from my pocket, and at the same time clapped his other hand over my mouth. Of course, I could have struggled away from him and freed my hand or gotten my mouth clear so that I might cry an alarm, but in a trice Yellow Handkerchief was on top of me.

I struggled around to no purpose in the bottom of the junk, while my legs and arms were tied and my mouth securely bound in what I afterward found to be a cotton shirt. Then I was left lying in the bottom. Yellow Handkerchief took the tiller, issuing his orders in whispers; and from our position at the time, and from the alteration of the sail, which I could dimly make out above me as a blot against the stars, I knew the junk was being headed into the mouth of a small slough which emptied at that point into San Rafael Creek.

In a couple of minutes we ran softly alongside the bank, and the sail was silently lowered. The Chinese kept very quiet. Yellow Handkerchief sat down in the bottom alongside of me, and I could feel him straining to repress his raspy, hacking cough. Possibly seven or eight minutes later I heard Charley's voice as the _Reindeer_ went past the mouth of the slough.

"I can't tell you how relieved I am," I could plainly hear him saying to Neil, "that the lad has finished with the fish patrol without accident."

Here Neil said something which I could not catch, and then Charley's voice went on:

"The youngster takes naturally to the water, and if, when he finishes high school, he takes a course in navigation and goes deep sea, I see no reason why he shouldn't rise to be master of the finest and biggest ship afloat."

It was all very flattering to me, but lying there, bound and gagged by my

own prisoners, with the voices growing faint and fainter as the _Reindeer_ slipped on through the darkness toward San Rafael, I must say I was not in quite the proper situation to enjoy my smiling future. With the _Reindeer_ went my last hope. What was to happen next I could not imagine, for the Chinese were a different race from mine, and from what I knew I was confident that fair play was no part of their make-up.

After waiting a few minutes longer, the crew hoisted the lateen sail, and Yellow Handkerchief steered down toward the mouth of San Rafael Creek. The tide was getting lower, and he had difficulty in escaping the mud-banks. I was hoping he would run aground, but he succeeded in making the Bay without accident.

As we passed out of the creek a noisy discussion arose, which I knew related to me. Yellow Handkerchief was vehement, but the other four as vehemently opposed him. It was very evident that he advocated doing away with me and that they were afraid of the consequences. I was familiar enough with the Chinese character to know that fear alone restrained them. But what plan they offered in place of Yellow Handkerchief's murderous one, I could not make out.

My feelings, as my fate hung in the balance, may be guessed. The discussion developed into a quarrel, in the midst of which Yellow Handkerchief unshipped the heavy tiller and sprang toward me. But his four companions threw themselves between, and a clumsy struggle took place for possession of the tiller. In the end Yellow Handkerchief was overcome, and sullenly returned to the steering, while they soundly berated him for his rashness.

Not long after, the sail was run down and the junk slowly urged forward by means of the sweeps. I felt it ground gently on the soft mud. Three of the Chinese—they all wore long sea-boots—got over the side, and the other two passed me across the rail. With Yellow Handkerchief at my legs and his two companions at my shoulders, they began to flounder along through the mud. After some time their feet struck firmer footing, and I knew they were carrying me up some beach. The location of this beach was not doubtful in my mind. It could be none other than one of the Marin Islands, a group of rocky islets which lay off the Marin County shore.

When they reached the firm sand that marked high tide, I was dropped, and none too gently. Yellow Handkerchief kicked me spitefully in the ribs, and then the trio floundered back through the mud to the junk. A moment later I heard the sail go up and slat in the wind as they drew in the sheet. Then silence fell, and I was left to my own devices for getting free.

I remembered having seen tricksters writhe and squirm out of ropes with which they were bound, but though I writhed and squirmed like a good fellow, the knots remained as hard as ever, and there was no appreciable slack. In the course of my squirming, however, I rolled over upon a heap of clam-shells—the remains, evidently, of some yachting party's clam-bake. This gave me an idea. My hands were tied behind my back; and, clutching a shell in them, I rolled over and over, up the beach, till I came to the rocks I knew to be there.

Rolling around and searching, I finally discovered a narrow crevice, into which I shoved the shell. The edge of it was sharp, and across the sharp edge I proceeded to saw the rope that bound my wrists. The edge of the shell was also brittle, and I broke it by bearing too heavily upon it. Then I rolled back to the heap and returned with as many shells as I could carry in both hands. I broke many shells, cut my hands a number of times, and got cramps in my legs from my strained position and my exertions.

While I was suffering from the cramps, and resting, I heard a familiar halloo drift across the water. It was Charley, searching for me. The gag in my mouth prevented me from replying, and I could only lie there, helplessly fuming, while he rowed past the island and his voice slowly lost itself in the distance.

I returned to the sawing process, and at the end of half an hour succeeded in severing the rope. The rest was easy. My hands once free, it was a matter of minutes to loosen my legs and to take the gag out of my mouth. I ran around the island to make sure it was an island and not by any chance a portion of the mainland. An island it certainly was, one of the Marin group, fringed with a sandy beach and surrounded by a sea of mud. Nothing remained but to wait till daylight and to keep warm; for it was a cold, raw night for California, with just enough wind to

pierce the skin and cause one to shiver.

To keep up the circulation, I ran around the island a dozen times or so, and clambered across its rocky backbone as many times more—all of which was of greater service to me, as I afterward discovered, than merely to warm me up. In the midst of this exercise I wondered if I had lost anything out of my pockets while rolling over and over in the sand. A search showed the absence of my revolver and pocket-knife. The first Yellow Handkerchief had taken; but the knife had been lost in the sand.

I was hunting for it when the sound of rowlocks came to my ears. At first, of course, I thought of Charley; but on second thought I knew Charley would be calling out as he rowed along. A sudden premonition of danger seized me. The Marin Islands are lonely places; chance visitors in the dead of night are hardly to be expected. What if it were Yellow Handkerchief? The sound made by the rowlocks grew more distinct. I crouched in the sand and listened intently. The boat, which I judged a small skiff from the quick stroke of the oars, was landing in the mud about fifty yards up the beach. I heard a raspy, hacking cough, and my heart stood still. It was Yellow Handkerchief. Not to be robbed of his revenge by his more cautious companions, he had stolen away from the village and come back alone.

I did some swift thinking. I was unarmed and helpless on a tiny islet, and a yellow barbarian, whom I had reason to fear, was coming after me. Any place was safer than the island, and I turned instinctively to the water, or rather to the mud. As he began to flounder ashore through the mud, I started to flounder out into it, going over the same course which the Chinese had taken in landing me and in returning to the junk.

Yellow Handkerchief, believing me to be lying tightly bound, exercised no care, but came ashore noisily. This helped me, for, under the shield of his noise and making no more of myself than necessary, I managed to cover fifty feet by the time he had made the beach. Here I lay down in the mud. It was cold and clammy, and made me shiver, but I did not care to stand up and run the risk of being discovered by his sharp eyes.

He walked down the beach straight to where he had left me lying, and I had a fleeting feeling of regret at not being able to see his surprise

when he did not find me. But it was a very fleeting regret, for my teeth were chattering with the cold.

What his movements were after that I had largely to deduce from the facts of the situation, for I could scarcely see him in the dim starlight. But I was sure that the first thing he did was to make the circuit of the beach to learn if landings had been made by other boats. This he would have known at once by the tracks through the mud.

Convinced that no boat had removed me from the island, he next started to find out what had become of me. Beginning at the pile of clam-shells, he lighted matches to trace my tracks in the sand. At such times I could see his villanous face plainly, and, when the sulphur from the matches irritated his lungs, between the raspy cough that followed and the clammy mud in which I was lying, I confess I shivered harder than ever.

The multiplicity of my footprints puzzled him. Then the idea that I might be out in the mud must have struck him, for he waded out a few yards in my direction, and, stooping, with his eyes searched the dim surface long and carefully. He could not have been more than fifteen feet from me, and had he lighted a match he would surely have discovered me.

He returned to the beach and clambered about, over the rocky backbone, again hunting for me with lighted matches, The closeness of the shave impelled me to further flight. Not daring to wade upright, on account of the noise made by floundering and by the suck of the mud, I remained lying down in the mud and propelled myself over its surface by means of my hands. Still keeping the trail made by the Chinese in going from and to the junk, I held on until I reached the water. Into this I waded to a depth of three feet, and then I turned off to the side on a line parallel with the beach.

The thought came to me of going toward Yellow Handkerchief's skiff and escaping in it, but at that very moment he returned to the beach, and, as though fearing the very thing I had in mind, he slushed out through the mud to assure himself that the skiff was safe. This turned me in the opposite direction. Half swimming, half wading, with my head just out of water and avoiding splashing, I succeeded in putting about a hundred feet

between myself and the spot where the Chinese had begun to wade ashore from the junk. I drew myself out on the mud and remained lying flat.

Again Yellow Handkerchief returned to the beach and made a search of the island, and again he returned to the heap of clam-shells. I knew what was running in his mind as well as he did himself. No one could leave or land without making tracks in the mud. The only tracks to be seen were those leading from his skiff and from where the junk had been. I was not on the island. I must have left it by one or the other of those two tracks. He had just been over the one to his skiff, and was certain I had not left that way. Therefore I could have left the island only by going over the tracks of the junk landing. This he proceeded to verify by wading out over them himself, lighting matches as he came along.

When he arrived at the point where I had first lain, I knew, by the matches he burned and the time he took, that he had discovered the marks left by my body. These he followed straight to the water and into it, but in three feet of water he could no longer see them. On the other hand, as the tide was still falling, he could easily make out the impression made by the junk's bow, and could have likewise made out the impression of any other boat if it had landed at that particular spot. But there was no such mark; and I knew that he was absolutely convinced that I was hiding somewhere in the mud.

But to hunt on a dark night for a boy in a sea of mud would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack, and he did not attempt it. Instead he went back to the beach and prowled around for some time. I was hoping he would give me up and go, for by this time I was suffering severely from the cold. At last he waded out to his skiff and rowed away. What if this departure of Yellow Handkerchief's were a sham? What if he had done it merely to entice me ashore?

The more I thought of it the more certain I became that he had made a little too much noise with his oars as he rowed away. So I remained, lying in the mud and shivering. I shivered till the muscles of the small of my back ached and pained me as badly as the cold, and I had need of all my self-control to force myself to remain in my miserable situation.

It was well that I did, however, for, possibly an hour later, I thought I

could make out something moving on the beach. I watched intently, but my ears were rewarded first, by a raspy cough I knew only too well. Yellow Handkerchief had sneaked back, landed on the other side of the island, and crept around to surprise me if I had returned.

After that, though hours passed without sign of him, I was afraid to return to the island at all. On the other hand, I was almost equally afraid that I should die of the exposure I was undergoing. I had never dreamed one could suffer so. I grew so cold and numb, finally, that I ceased to shiver. But my muscles and bones began to ache in a way that was agony. The tide had long since begun to rise, and, foot by foot, it drove me in toward the beach. High water came at three o'clock, and at three o'clock I drew myself up on the beach, more dead than alive, and too helpless to have offered any resistance had Yellow Handkerchief swooped down upon me.

But no Yellow Handkerchief appeared. He had given me up and gone back to Point Pedro. Nevertheless, I was in a deplorable, not to say dangerous, condition. I could not stand upon my feet, much less walk. My clammy, muddy garments clung to me like sheets of ice. I thought I should never get them off. So numb and lifeless were my fingers, and so weak was I, that it seemed to take an hour to get off my shoes. I had not the strength to break the porpoise-hide laces, and the knots defied me. I repeatedly beat my hands upon the rocks to get some sort of life into them. Sometimes I felt sure I was going to die.

But in the end,—after several centuries, it seemed to me,—I got off the last of my clothes. The water was now close at hand, and I crawled painfully into it and washed the mud from my naked body. Still, I could not get on my feet and walk and I was afraid to lie still. Nothing remained but to crawl weakly, like a snail, and at the cost of constant pain, up and down the sand. I kept this up as long as possible, but as the east paled with the coming of dawn I began to succumb. The sky grew rosy-red, and the golden rim of the sun, showing above the horizon, found me lying helpless and motionless among the clam-shells.

As in a dream, I saw the familiar mainsail of the Reindeer as she slipped out of San Rafael Creek on a light puff of morning air. This dream was very much broken. There are intervals I can never recollect on

looking back over it. Three things, however, I distinctly remember: the first sight of the _Reindeer's_ mainsail; her lying at anchor a few hundred feet away and a small boat leaving her side; and the cabin stove roaring red-hot, myself swathed all over with blankets, except on the chest and shoulders, which Charley was pounding and mauling unmercifully, and my mouth and throat burning with the coffee which Neil Partington was pouring down a trifle too hot.

But burn or no burn, I tell you it felt good. By the time we arrived in Oakland I was as limber and strong as ever,—though Charlie and Neil Partington were afraid I was going to have pneumonia, and Mrs. Partington, for my first six months of school, kept an anxious eye upon me to discover the first symptoms of consumption.

Time flies. It seems but yesterday that I was a lad of sixteen on the fish patrol. Yet I know that I arrived this very morning from China, with a quick passage to my credit, and master of the barkentine _Harvester_. And I know that to-morrow morning I shall run over to Oakland to see Neil Partington and his wife and family, and later on up to Benicia to see Charley Le Grant and talk over old times. No; I shall not go to Benicia, now that I think about it. I expect to be a highly interested party to a wedding, shortly to take place. Her name is Alice Partington, and, since Charley has promised to be best man, he will have to come down to Oakland instead.



POETRY AS A SPOKEN ART.

by Amy Lowell. The Dial 1/25/1917

To speak of poetry as a "spoken art," may seem in this age of printing a misnomer ; and it is just because of such a point of view that the essential kinship of poetry and music is so often lost sight of. The "beat" of poetry, its musical quality, is exactly that which differentiates it from prose, and it is this musical quality which bears in it the stress of emotion without which no true poetry can exist. Prose itself when it is fused with emotion becomes rhythmic, which rhythm in turn heightens the emotional effect. The great orators of all time have been great because of their power to achieve this effect. Poetry and oratorical prose have this in common, that they are both intended primarily to be heard, not seen.

"We moderns read so much more than we listen, that perhaps it is no wonder if we get into the habit of using our minds more than our ears, where literature is concerned, with the result that our imaginative, mental ear becomes absolutely atrophied. What I mean by our imaginative, mental ear is this : Most of us possess quite a handsome degree of visual imagination. In reading a book, we visualize its scenes. If we are reading about an orchard with an old stone seat

set in an angle under blossoming boughs, we see the orchard, and the seat, with a good deal of distinctness, before us. Of course, the degree to which we see it depends upon how highly developed our imaginative power is. But I have never met anyone so devoid of all such power as not to visualize to some extent the scenes of the story he was reading.

Now here is a curious thing: In the case of the average person, auditory imagination is not nearly so well developed as visual.

Why this should be, I do not know. Possibly it is the writer's fault, or rather misfortune; it may be easier to convey the impression of a sight than of a sound. Whatever the cause may be that we do not hear things off paper as well as we see them, the fact, I believe, is indisputable.

No art has suffered so much from printing as has poetry. Our cheap processes of color reproduction do not really reproduce the picture whose name they bear, they are merely so many shorthand notes upon it. If we have seen the picture, they serve to remind us of it ; if we have not, they give us a kind of passport introduction to it when we meet it. They in no way attempt to replace the original picture, that exists apart from them, and no one would think of studying art by these reproductions alone. In the case of photographs, we have a still more restricted form of memoranda. For in photography, colors can only be given as light and shade. Photographs of paintings are more satisfactory than color reproductions, because the imagination has more scope and does its work infinitely better than any mechanical color process can do.

But take the case of poetry. Here we have

no galleries of original pieces to which the art-hungry can turn. The reproduction, the printed book, is the only tangible substance which poetry has. If photography and colorprinting are the conventionalized symbols of pictures, how much slighter, less adequate, are the conventionalized symbols of poetry. Printed words, of no beauty in themselves, of no value except to rouse the imagination and cause it to function.

Again, take the case of music. Here we have a condition almost exactly similar to that of poetry, except for one thing. Printed notes are no more beautiful than printed words, but here comes in the one saving fact, nobody (except highly trained musicians) expects to read music, everybody is desirous of, insists upon, hearing it

Poetry is as much an art to be heard as is music, if we could only get people to understand the fact. To read it off the printed pages without pronouncing it is to get only a portion of its beauty, and yet it is just this that most people do.

Of course, the reason here is very simple. Wordsworth's "Ode to Immortality" is manufactured with the very same tools we employ when we order the dinner. The tools in both cases are words. Everybody uses words, and uses them all the time. The most uneducated peasant talks. Words are the birthright of humanity. To be dumb is to be deformed. Using the common implements of all the world, poetry is treated with a cavalier ease which music escapes. A long and special training is required to learn and understand music. The layman does not carry a musical score home in his pocket to read in the

evening. If he wants to hear Debussy's "L'Après-midi d'un Faune," for instance, he goes to a concert, where an orchestra of carefully trained musicians interprets it for him. Poetry will come into its Paradise when carefully trained speakers make a business of interpreting it to the world. And poetry needs such interpretation, for I suppose it is only one reader out of a hundred (and I think that percentage is rather high than otherwise) who can possibly get all the beauty out of a poem.

Everyone knows that poetry existed before printing, and I imagine there is no doubt that it existed before writing, although, of course, that cannot be proved. Even so recently as the Middle Ages, troubadours went from castle to castle chanting their poems to delighted listeners. For people listened then, partly because they could not read, and also because, even if they could, there were so few books. With the rise of printing, with the advent of a reading populace, poetry ceased to be chanted, ceased to be read aloud at all for the most part; and the poet has suffered as a composer would suffer whose works were doomed to be rendered by no finer instrument than an accordion.

Shakespeare is the greatest English poet who has ever existed, and doubtless he would have been considered so under all circumstances. But Shakespeare has certainly enjoyed one inestimable advantage over all purely lyric poets — he has been acted for three hundred years, and that means that he has been spoken. People have heard his poetry rendered by men and women of extraordinary genius, who have spent their lives in studying it. The world has been

forced to receive his poetry, the whole of his poetry, all its beauty of sound and content. There has been no excuse for misunderstanding him, and he has not been misunderstood. To hear a man like Forbes-Robertson speak Hamlet's words is like hearing Kreisler play Bach, an experience never to be forgotten. It is because we so seldom hear poetry adequately rendered that the art has for so long lapsed in popular favor. For years only those people trained to receive it as audible impression through the sense of sight have been able thoroughly to comprehend it. The few people who attempt to read it aloud are handicapped by the realization of the unusual quality of their task, and lose their sense of proportion and simplicity in the welter of artistic theories of expression which have gradually come into being. Let us examine a few of these theories, and see in what way they have hampered the enjoyment of poetry, and its simple, straightforward appeal. I remember once hearing Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson say that there was a good tradition of acting, and a poor tradition, and that because the latter existed was no reason to decry the former. That is as true of the reading of poetry aloud as of acting. But the trouble is that the good tradition is only one, and there are ninety and nine poor traditions to balance it. At least, actors have some training, but with poetry readers, if they have any, it is invariably one of the ninety and nine. I suppose that is because there is a good deal of extraneous technique about acting which can be taught, whereas the reading of poetry is a very subtle thing and almost incommunicable. Tell a person to put feeling into his voice,

and behold, he puts in sentimentality. Tell him to vary his voice with the different speakers, and he gives you a ventriloquistic effect which is horrible. The truth is, it is a question of the inch on the end of a man's nose. The slightest inflection awry and the whole effect is spoiled.

Speaking lines in a modern play is a comparatively easy thing, reading poetry is quite different. In a play, one can rely to a certain extent upon acting, and upon one's fellow actors. In reading, one is all alone, and one must not act. I do not mean that one should not read with expression. I mean that it is more dangerous to overdo dramatic expression than to underdo it.

Reading is not acting, and the point cannot be too strongly insisted upon. The pitfall of all elocution-taught readers is that they fail to see this distinction. Great actresses like Sara Bernhardt or Duse do not make this mistake, it is the little people who are not sure of their power of creating an effect by an inflection who fall into the error.

Again, the reader must not be confused with the impersonator. Impersonators act out their parts, although they are all alone upon the stage. They are approaching the brains of their audiences from the same standpoint as the actor. They are acting in fact. This point is the crux of the situation. In a play, the audience is intended to see the march of events with its physical eyes. It is, as it were, looking through a window at an actual scene. It must be made to feel the reality of what is before it. Even in mystical plays like Maeterlinck's "Peleas and Melisande," the audience must have the sense of actuality. Dream world though it be, it

is for the moment real.

In reading, the impression to be made upon an audience is achieved by quite other means.

Here the audience must see nothing with its eyes which detracts from its mental vision.

It must be made to imagine so vividly that it forgets the reader in the thing read. The dramatic quality of the piece must be given just in so far as it stimulates imagination, but never so far as to call attention to the reader as an actual personality.

I have said that there is a good tradition of speaking poetry, and ninety and nine bad traditions. Let us consider for a moment the bad traditions. (I shall take the word "reading" to imply the pronouncing of poetry aloud, whether it be done in character on the stage, or in propria persona from the platform.)

The first bad tradition is the mispronouncing of words. This starts from a misconception of the laws of English prosody, and a desire to heighten the poetical effect by some elegance other than those the author thought fit to insert.

The word most mispronounced in the whole vocabulary, by poetry readers and singers alike, is "wind." Unless the reader or singer is very well educated indeed, so well educated that he or she knows enough to be quite simple and natural, that unhappy word changes at once to "winde." Why? What is the reason for the change! The reason, in the case of nine readers out of ten, is merely that they have been taught to do it. But the reason which has actuated those teachers who have thought about the matter at all and not, themselves, repeated, parrot-like, from some earlier master, is based upon ignorance of the rules

under which English poetry is written. Why was "wind" ever pronounced "winde" in poetry, for it never is, and never was, in prose? Cannot we imagine the reason? Not a bad reason when one is in ignorance of any prosodic laws. It was because poets insisted upon rhyming it with "find," and "bind," and other words where the "i" was obviously long. To pronounce it with a long "i" saved the rhyming sound, thought these wiseacres, and that this pronunciation took all the windy connotations away from the word was to them of minor importance. Elocution teachers are seldom concerned with *le mot juste*; "winde" sounded like a perfect rhyme, "wind" did not, so "winde" it had to be.

But the good old English prosody which served Shakespeare, and Spenser, and Milton so excellently well, had one life-saving rule. It was that words spelt the same and pronounced differently, rhymed; as did also words pronounced the same and spelt differently. For instance, "plough" rhymed with "cow," an obvious chime, as we have recognized by spelling "bough" with an "ow" instead of the old "ough"; also "peak" rhymed with "break," and "push" with "rush," and "deaf" with "sheaf." All these non-chiming rhymes we have kept, probably because of the difficulty of changing them to fit. For we all balk at the "pake" of a mountain, or at a brook "rooshing" down a hill, and few of us can "puush" ourselves to make such radical changes. It is true that in old times "deaf" was universally pronounced "deef," but good use has altered it to "deaf" without altering its co-rhymes, and he would be a bold man who should dare to speak of a "sheff" of wheat for any reason whatsoever.

ever.

In recent years, a group of poetasters has arisen that declares these near-rhymes to be an offense to the ear, and proudly eschews them. A reform which would command more sympathy had these precious gentlemen produced a single masterpiece to substantiate it. They have not; and the reason is not far to seek. The old, great masters knew their job, and knew it superlatively well. They realized that the English language suffers from a paucity of rhymes. A certain elasticity was necessary if thought was to be adequately clothed in metre and rhyme. Being artists, not pedants, they found this elasticity, as I have shown.

Now we understand how "wind" came to be tortured into "winde," and can see why the latter is never under any circumstances to be employed.

An important rule for the reading of poetry is never to mispronounce words. Give them the sound they have in everyday speech, and let the blunder of a false rhyme, if there be one, rest on the author.

Another of the bad traditions insists that poetry should be read as if it were prose. That is, that the reader should follow the punctuation marks and not the swing of the metre. This arose as a protest to the equally bad tradition which dropped the voice at the end of each line, regardless of the sense. Of course, monotony was the result of this latter practice. The sense of the poem was lost, while the rhythm was exaggerated out of all proportion.

People have often taken issue with the proposition that poetry should not be read as if it were prose. People who have not

grasped the meaning, that is. "But," they say, "surely you don't like to have poetry read in a sing-song manner." Assuredly, I do not ; and yet I say, unhesitatingly, that if one must choose between these two bad traditions, I prefer to have the rhythm overaccented than to have it lost sight of altogether. As a matter of fact, neither extreme is necessary. The good tradition, as is the way with good traditions, seeks the happy mean.

Blank verse is a long, stately metre composed of simple, dignified feet. It is rare to find a blank verse poem in which the rhythms should be more than faintly indicated. But there are other metres in which the effect is entirely lost unless the rhythm is brought out so strongly as to become almost a lilt. We must suppose that the poet knew what he was about when he chose one metre rather than another. It is an impertinence to obscure his rhythm, and not give it its full value.

But, it may be asked, how is one to know when a rhythm is to be merely indicated, and when it is to be actively stressed ? I can only reply that much experience is required to know this. But experience is a sure guide. Knowledge of an author's methods, sympathy with the aim of the poem, a realization that certain metres require certain renderings, all these things tell the reader what he should do. In the last analysis, it is common sense, and nowhere is common sense more needed than in the reading of poetry.

Take the case of vers libre. For that to be misunderstood is both strange and unfortunate, since it owes its inception to no personal idiosyncrasy, but has been slowly evolved from existing laws. This is so little

comprehended that hysterical people are constantly asking what it is, and whether it is prose or poetry, and is it destined entirely to supersede metrical verse.

To answer these questions categorically, let us begin with the last. Art has fashions ; or if you prefer the term as more dignified, it is subject to the law of evolution. Differences are constantly being evolved; some are real changes, some only samenesses with a twist to them. Art, like life, has a queer way of revolving upon itself. Personally I feel that vers libre and metrical verse can exist side by side as cheerfully as do blank verse and quatrains. But this will not happen until people realize that vers libre is a prosodic form, and not an invitation to loose all the seven devils upon the reading public.

The second question, whether vers libre is poetry or prose, can be treated quite summarily. It is assuredly poetry. That it may dispense with rhyme, and must dispense with metre, does not affect its substance in the least. For no matter with what it dispenses, it retains that essential to all poetry : Rhythm.

Where stanzas are printed in an even pattern of metrical lines, some sense of rhythm can be gained by the eye. Where they are not, as in vers libre, the reading aloud becomes an absolute condition of comprehension.

If the modern movement in poetry could be defined in a sentence, the truest thing which could be said of it, and which would include all its variations, would be that it is a movement to restore the audible quality to poetry, to insist upon it as a spoken art.

WHAT OF THE NIGHT?

WILLARD HUNTINGTON WRIGHT

from *The Forum*, 1913

What of the night
And the eventual silences?
Art thou not cold with the knowledge of decay
And the uncompromising reaches of the earth?
What of the night
When the tune falters and the blood chills?
When thou art one with the grass
And the underbrush of the world,
Wilt thou forget the names of flowers,
The rhythm of song and the lips still balmy with the breasts of
women?
When thou and the fog on the hilltop are as brother and sister,
Wilt thou forget utterly the ways of men,
The clash of swords and the sting of wine,
The dim horizons and the grace of girls?
When thou art alone eternally
What of the night?
Where will God be
When thou art swathed in silence;
When the wreckage of dreams has crushed thee
And the lust for springtimes dissolved thee?
Wilt thou have visions only of the dawn
And autumn sunsets?
Will the memory of women's faces haunt thy grave?
Will the odor of blue flowers find thy dust?
When thou art choking on the calm indifference of youth
And the everlasting beauty of trees,
Wilt thou dream only of the June,
The love of women and the great democracy of men?
When thou hast fought and failed,
And thy brow has withered laurelless,
And thy name has been effaced by the insatiable winds,

And thou hast gone out at the Western gate
To join the laggards of the dead,

Wilt thou crave only the withheld success,
The transitory fame of twilight years?
Will thy soul cry out only for the song,
The red dawn and the glad triumph of love?
Wilt thou indeed forget the days of pain,
The ineffectual prayers,
The lies of time and the bitterness of defeat?
Or, remembering these things,
Wilt thou forget the hands of women and the rude love of men,
And be glad of thy dark quietude?
When thou art part of the impending gloom,
I deem that life will seem to thee
In no such wise,—
But rather thou wilt dream it as a whole;
Not as a song, nor yet a broken bell;
But all that thou hast been—the great tears,
The rain, the kisses and the flutes,
The old sorrows and the hills at dawn,
Much laughter and much grief and the stern fight.
And thou shalt know how all of life is gain
The gold of youth, the gray defeat of age—
How in the soul's inharmony there lies
The incoherent unity of things

“ FEUERZAUBER ”

LOUIS UNTERMEYER (Ibid)

I never knew the earth had so much gold—
The fields run over with it, and this hill,
Hoary and old,
Is young with buoyant blooms that flame and thrill.

Such golden fires, such yellows—lo, how good
This spendthrift world, and what a lavish God!
This fringe of wood
Blazing with buttercup and goldenrod...

You too, beloved, are changed; again I see
Your face grow mystical, as on that night
You turned to me
And all the trembling world—and you—were white.

Aye, you are touched; your singing lips grow dumb,
The fields absorb you, color you entire—
And you become
A goddess standing in a ring of fire!



PETALS

from The Project Gutenberg EBook of
A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass, by Amy Lowell

Life is a stream
On which we strew
Petal by petal the flower of our heart;
The end lost in dream,
They float past our view,
We only watch their glad, early start.

Freighted with hope,
Crimsoned with joy,
We scatter the leaves of our opening rose;
Their widening scope,
Their distant employ,

We never shall know. And the stream as it flows
Sweeps them away,
Each one is gone
Ever beyond into infinite ways.
We alone stay
While years hurry on,
The flower faded forth, though its fragrance still stays.



LA GRANDE BRETÈCHE

Project Gutenberg's *Little French Masterpieces*, by Honoré de Balzac

About one hundred yards from Vendôme, on the banks of the Loire, there stands an old dark-coloured house, surmounted by a very high roof, and so completely isolated that there is not in the neighbourhood a single evil-smelling tannery or wretched inn, such as we see in the outskirts of almost every small town. In front of the house is a small garden bordering the river, in which the boxwood borders of the paths, once neatly trimmed, now grow at their pleasure. A few willows, born in the Loire, have grown as rapidly as the hedge which encloses the garden, and half conceal the house. The plants which we call weeds adorn the slope of the bank with their luxuriant vegetation. The fruit-trees, neglected for ten years, bear no fruit; their offshoots form a dense undergrowth. The espaliers resemble hornbeam hedges. The paths, formerly gravelled, are overrun with purslane; but, to tell the truth, there are no well-marked paths.

From the top of the mountain upon which hang the ruins of the old château of the Dukes of Vendôme, the only spot from which the eye

can look into this enclosure, you would say to yourself that, at a period which it is difficult to determine, that little nook was the delight of some gentleman devoted to roses and tulips, to horticulture in short, but especially fond of fine fruit. You espy an arbour, or rather the ruins of an arbour, beneath which a table still stands, not yet entirely consumed by time. At sight of that garden, which is no longer a garden, one may divine the negative delights of the peaceful life which provincials lead, as one divines the existence of a worthy tradesman by reading the epitaph on his tombstone. To round out the melancholy yet soothing thoughts which fill the mind, there is on one of the walls a sun-dial, embellished with this commonplace Christian inscription: *ULTIMAM COGITA*. The roof of the house is terribly dilapidated, the blinds are always drawn, the balconies are covered with swallow's-nests, the doors are never opened. Tall weeds mark with green lines the cracks in the steps; the ironwork is covered with rust. Moon, sun, winter, summer, snow, have rotted the wood, warped the boards, and corroded the paint.

The deathly silence which reigns there is disturbed only by the birds, the cats, the martens, the rats and the mice, which are at liberty to run about, to fight, and to eat one another at their will. An invisible hand has written everywhere the word *MYSTERY*. If, impelled by curiosity, you should go to inspect the house on the street side, you would see a high gate arched at the top, in which the children of the neighbourhood have made numberless holes. I learned later that that gate had been condemned ten years before. Through these irregular breaches you would be able to observe the perfect harmony between the garden front and the courtyard front. The same disorder reigns supreme in both. Tufts of weeds surround the pavements. Enormous cracks furrow the walls, whose blackened tops are enlaced by the countless tendrils of climbing plants. The steps are wrenched apart, the bell-rope is rotten, the gutters are broken. "What fire from heaven has passed this way? What tribunal has ordered salt to be strewn upon this dwelling? Has God been insulted here? Has France been betrayed?" Such are the questions which one asks one's self. The reptiles crawl hither and thither without answering. That empty and deserted house is an immense riddle, the solution of which is known to no one.

It was formerly a small feudal estate and bore the name of La Grande

Bretèche. During my stay at Vendôme, where Desplein had left me to attend a rich patient, the aspect of that strange building became one of my keenest pleasures. Was it not more than a mere ruin? Some souvenirs of undeniable authenticity are always connected with a ruin; but that abode, still standing, although in process of gradual demolition by an avenging hand, concealed a secret, an unknown thought; at the very least, it betrayed a caprice. More than once, in the evening, I wandered in the direction of the hedge, now wild and uncared for, which surrounded that enclosure. I defied scratches, and made my way into that ownerless garden, that estate which was neither public nor private; and I remained whole hours there contemplating its disarray. Not even to learn the story which would doubtless account for that extraordinary spectacle would I have asked a single question of any Vendôme gossip. Straying about there, I composed delightful romances, I abandoned myself to little orgies of melancholy which enchanted me.

If I had learned the cause of that perhaps most commonplace neglect, I should have lost the unspoken poesy with which I intoxicated myself. To me that spot represented the most diverse images of human life darkened by its misfortunes; now it was the air of the cloister, minus the monks; again, the perfect peace of the cemetery, minus the dead speaking their epitaphic language; to-day, the house of the leper; to-morrow, that of the Fates; but it was, above all, the image of the province, with its meditation, with its hour-glass life. I have often wept there, but never laughed. More than once I have felt an involuntary terror, as I heard above my head the low rustling made by the wings of some hurrying dove. The ground is damp; you must beware of lizards, snakes, and toads, which wander about there with the fearless liberty of nature; above all, you must not fear the cold, for, after a few seconds, you feel an icy cloak resting upon your shoulders, like the hand of the Commendator on the neck of Don Juan. One evening I had shuddered there; the wind had twisted an old rusty weathervane, whose shrieks resembled a groan uttered by the house at the moment that I was finishing a rather dismal melodrama, by which I sought to explain to myself that species of monumental grief. I returned to my inn, beset by sombre thoughts. When I had supped, my hostess entered my room with a mysterious air, and said to me:

"Here is Monsieur Regnault, monsieur."

"Who is Monsieur Regnault?"

"What! Monsieur doesn't know Monsieur Regnault? That's funny!" she said, as she left the room.

Suddenly I saw a tall, slender man, dressed in black, with his hat in his hand, who entered the room like a ram ready to rush at his rival, disclosing a retreating forehead, a small, pointed head, and a pale face, not unlike a glass of dirty water. You would have said that he was the doorkeeper of some minister. He wore an old coat, threadbare at the seams; but he had a diamond in his shirt-frill and gold rings in his ears.

"To whom have I the honour of speaking, monsieur?" I asked him.

He took a chair, seated himself in front of my fire, placed his hat on my table, and replied, rubbing his hands:

"Ah! it's very cold! I am Monsieur Regnault, monsieur."

I bowed, saying to myself:

"_Il Bondocani!_ Look for him!"

"I am the notary at Vendôme," he continued.

"I am delighted to hear it, monsieur," I exclaimed, "but I am not ready to make my will, for reasons best known to myself."

"Just a minute," he rejoined, raising his hand as if to impose silence upon me. "I beg pardon, monsieur, I beg pardon! I have heard that you go to walk sometimes in the garden of La Grande Bretèche."

"Yes, monsieur!"

"Just a minute," he said, repeating his gesture; "that practice constitutes a downright trespass. I have come, monsieur, in the name

and as executor of the late Madame Countess de Merret, to beg you to discontinue your visits. Just a minute! I'm not a Turk, and I don't propose to charge you with a crime. Besides, it may well be that you are not aware of the circumstances which compel me to allow the finest mansion in Vendôme to fall to ruin. However, monsieur, you seem to be a man of education, and you must know that the law forbids entrance upon an enclosed estate under severe penalties. A hedge is as good as a wall. But the present condition of the house may serve as an excuse for your curiosity. I would ask nothing better than to allow you to go and come as you please in that house; but, as it is my duty to carry out the will of the testatrix, I have the honour, monsieur, to request you not to go into that garden again. Even I myself, monsieur, since the opening of the will, have never set foot inside that house, which, as I have had the honour to tell you, is a part of the estate of Madame de Merret. We simply reported the number of doors and windows, in order to fix the amount of the impost which I pay annually from the fund set aside for that purpose by the late countess. Ah! her will made a great deal of talk in Vendôme, monsieur."

At that, he stopped to blow his nose, the excellent man. I respected his loquacity, understanding perfectly that the administration of Madame de Merret's property was the important event of his life--his reputation, his glory, his Restoration. I must needs bid adieu to my pleasant reveries, to my romances; so that I was not inclined to scorn the pleasure of learning the truth from an official source.

"Would it be indiscreet, monsieur," I asked him, "to ask you the reason of this extraordinary state of affairs?"

At that question an expression which betrayed all the pleasure that a man feels who is accustomed to ride a hobby passed over the notary's face. He pulled up his shirt collar with a self-satisfied air, produced his snuff-box, opened it, offered it to me, and at my refusal, took a famous pinch himself. He was happy; the man who has no hobby has no idea of the satisfaction that can be derived from life. A hobby is the precise mean between passion and monomania. At that moment I understood the witty expression of Sterne in all its extent, and I had a perfect conception of the joy with which Uncle Toby, with Trim's assistance, bestrode his battle-horse.

"Monsieur," said Monsieur Regnault, "I was chief clerk to Master Roguin of Paris. An excellent office, of which you may have heard? No? Why, it was made famous by a disastrous failure. Not having sufficient money to practise in Paris, at the price to which offices had risen in 1816, I came here and bought the office of my predecessor. I had relatives in Vendôme, among others a very rich aunt, who gave me her daughter in marriage. Monsieur," he continued after a brief pause, "three months after being licensed by the Keeper of the Seals I was sent for one evening, just as I was going to bed (I was not then married), by Madame Countess de Merret, to come to her Château de Merret. Her maid, an excellent girl who works in this inn to-day, was at my door with madame countess's carriage. But, just a minute! I must tell you, monsieur, that Monsieur Count de Merret had gone to Paris to die, two months before I came here. He died miserably there, abandoning himself to excesses of all sorts. You understand?--On the day of his departure madame countess had left La Grande Bretèche and had dismantled it. Indeed, some people declare that she burned the furniture and hangings, and all chattels whatsoever now contained in the estate leased by the said--What on earth am I saying? I beg pardon, I thought I was dictating a lease.--That she burned them," he continued, "in the fields at Merret. Have you been to Merret, monsieur? No?" he said, answering his own question. "Ah! that is a lovely spot! for about three months," he continued, after a slight shake of the head, "monsieur count and madame countess led a strange life.

"They received no guests; madame lived on the ground floor, and monsieur on the first floor. When madame countess was left alone, she never appeared except at church. Later, in her own house, at her château, she refused to see the friends who came to see her. She was already much changed when she left La Grande Bretèche to go to Merret. The dear woman--I say 'dear,' because this diamond came from her; but I actually only saw her once,--the excellent lady, then, was very ill; she had doubtless despaired of her health, for she died without calling a doctor; so that many of our ladies thought that she was not in full possession of her wits. My curiosity was therefore strangely aroused, monsieur, when I learned that Madame de Merret needed my services. I was not the only one who took an interest in that story. That same evening, although it was late, the whole town knew that I had gone to

Merret. The maid answered rather vaguely the questions that I asked her on the road; she told me, however, that her mistress had received the sacrament from the curé of Merret during the day, and that she did not seem likely to live through the night.

"I reached the château about eleven o'clock; I mounted the main staircase. After passing through divers large rooms, high and dark, and as cold and damp as the devil, I reached the state bedchamber where the countess was. According to the reports that were current concerning that lady--I should never end, monsieur, if I should repeat all the stories that are told about her--I had thought of her as a coquette. But, if you please, I had much difficulty in finding her in the huge bed in which she lay. To be sure, to light that enormous wainscoted chamber of the old *_régime_*, where everything was so covered with dust that it made one sneeze simply to look at it, she had only one of those old-fashioned Argand lamps. Ah! but you have never been to Merret. Well, monsieur, the bed is one of those beds of the olden time, with a high canopy of flowered material. A small night-table stood beside the bed, and I saw upon it a copy of the *_Imitation of Jesus Christ_*, which, by the by, I bought for my wife, as well as the lamp. There was also a large couch for the attendant, and two chairs. Not a spark of fire. That was all the furniture. It wouldn't have filled ten lines in an inventory.

"Oh! my dear monsieur, if you had seen, as I then saw it, that huge room hung with dark tapestry, you would have imagined yourself transported into a genuine scene from a novel. It was icy cold; and, more than that, absolutely funereal," he added, raising his arm with a theatrical gesture, and pausing for a moment. "By looking hard and walking close to the bed, I succeeded in discovering Madame de Merret, thanks to the lamp, the light of which shone upon the pillow. Her face was as yellow as wax, and resembled two clasped hands. She wore a lace cap, which revealed her lovely hair, as white as snow. She was sitting up, and seemed to retain that position with much difficulty. Her great black eyes, dulled by fever no doubt, and already almost lifeless, hardly moved beneath the bones which the eyebrows cover--these," he said, pointing to the arch over his eyes.--"Her brow was moist. Her fleshless hands resembled bones covered with tightly-drawn skin; her veins and muscles could be seen perfectly. She must have been very

beautiful; but at that moment I was seized with an indefinable feeling at her aspect. Never before, according to those who laid her out, had a living creature attained such thinness without dying. In short, she was horrible to look at; disease had so wasted that woman that she was nothing more than a phantom. Her pale violet lips seemed not to move when she spoke to me. Although my profession had familiarised me with such spectacles, by taking me sometimes to the pillows of dying persons to take down their last wishes, I confess that the families in tears and despair whom I had seen were as nothing beside that solitary, silent woman in that enormous château.

"I did not hear the slightest sound, I could not detect the movement which the breathing of the sick woman should have imparted to the sheets that covered her; and I stood quite still, gazing at her in a sort of stupor. It seems to me that I am there now. At last her great eyes moved, she tried to raise her right hand, which fell back upon the bed, and these words came from her mouth like a breath, for her voice had already ceased to be a voice: 'I have been awaiting you with much impatience.'--Her cheeks suddenly flushed. It was a great effort for her to speak, monsieur.--'Madame,' I said. She motioned to me to be silent. At that moment the old nurse rose and whispered in my ear: 'Don't speak; madame countess cannot bear to hear the slightest sound, and what you said might excite her.'--I sat down. A few moments later, Madame de Merret collected all her remaining strength, to move her right arm and thrust it, not without infinite difficulty, beneath her bolster; she paused for just a moment; then she made a last effort to withdraw her hand, and when she finally produced a sealed paper, drops of sweat fell from her brow.--'I place my will in your hands,' she said. 'O _mon Dieu_, oh!' That was all. She grasped a crucifix that lay on her bed, hastily put it to her lips, and died. The expression of her staring eyes makes me shudder even now, when I think of it. She must have suffered terribly! There was a gleam of joy in her last glance, a sentiment which remained in her dead eyes.

"I carried the will away; and when it was opened, I found that Madame de Merret had appointed me her executor. She left all her property to the hospital at Vendôme with the exception of a few individual legacies. But these were her provisions with respect to La Grande Bretèche: She directed me to leave her house, for fifty years from the

day of her death, in the same condition as at the moment that she died; forbidding any person whatsoever to enter the rooms, forbidding the slightest repairs to be made, and even setting aside a sum in order to hire keepers, if it should be found necessary, to assure the literal execution of her purpose. At the expiration of that period, if the desire of the testatrix has been carried out, the house is to belong to my heirs, for monsieur knows that notaries cannot accept legacies. If not, La Grande Bretèche is to revert to whoever is entitled to it, but with the obligation to comply with the conditions set forth in a codicil attached to the will, which is not to be opened until the expiration of the said fifty years. The will was not attacked; and so----"

At that, without finishing his sentence, the elongated notary glanced at me with a triumphant air, and I made him altogether happy by addressing a few compliments to him.

"Monsieur," I said, "you have made a profound impression upon me, so that I think I see that dying woman, paler than her sheets; her gleaming eyes terrify me; and I shall dream of her to-night. But you must have formed some conjecture concerning the provisions of that extraordinary will."

"Monsieur," he said with a comical reserve, "I never allow myself to judge the conduct of those persons who honour me by giving me a diamond."

I soon loosened the tongue of the scrupulous Vendôme notary, who communicated to me, not without long digressions, observations due to the profound politicians of both sexes whose decrees are law in Vendôme. But those observations were so contradictory and so diffuse that I almost fell asleep, despite the interest I took in that authentic narrative. The dull and monotonous tone of the notary, who was accustomed, no doubt, to listen to himself, and to force his clients and his fellow citizens to listen to him, triumphed over my curiosity.

"Aha! many people, monsieur," he said to me on the landing, "would like to live forty-five years more; but just a minute!" and with a sly

expression he placed his right forefinger on his nose, as if he would have said: "Just mark what I say."--"But to do that, to do that," he added, "a man must be less than sixty."

I closed my door, having been roused from my apathy by this last shaft, which the notary considered very clever; then I seated myself in my easy-chair, placing my feet on the andirons. I was soon absorbed in an imaginary romance _à la_ Radcliffe, based upon the judicial observations of Monsieur Regnault, when my door, under the skillful manipulation of a woman's hand, turned upon its hinges. My hostess appeared, a stout, red-faced woman, of excellent disposition, who had missed her vocation; she was a Fleming, who should have been born in a picture by Teniers.

"Well, monsieur," she said, "no doubt Monsieur Regnault has given you his story of La Grande Bretèche?"

"Yes, Mother Lepas."

"What did he tell you?"

I repeated in a few words the chilling and gloomy story of Madame de Merret. At each sentence my hostess thrust out her neck, gazing at me with the true innkeeper's perspicacity--a sort of happy medium between the instinct of the detective, the cunning of the spy, and the craft of the trader.

"My dear Madame Lepas," I added, as I concluded, "you evidently know more, eh? If not, why should you have come up here?"

"Oh! on an honest woman's word, as true as my name's Lepas----"

"Don't swear; your eyes are big with a secret. You knew Monsieur de Merret. What sort of a man was he?"

"Bless my soul! Monsieur de Merret was a fine man, whom you never could see the whole of, he was so long; an excellent gentleman, who came here from Picardy, and who had his brains very near his cap, as we say here. He paid cash for everything, in order not to have trouble with anybody.

You see, he was lively. We women all found him very agreeable."

"Because he was lively?" I asked.

"That may be," she said. "You know, monsieur, that a man must have had something in front of him, as they say, to marry Madame de Merret, who, without saying anything against the others, was the loveliest and richest woman in the whole province. She had about twenty thousand francs a year. The whole town went to her wedding. The bride was dainty and attractive, a real jewel of a woman. Ah! they made a handsome couple at that time!"

"Did they live happily together?"

"Oh dear! oh dear! yes and no, so far as any one could tell; for, as you can imagine, we folks didn't live on intimate terms with them. Madame de Merret was a kind-hearted woman, very pleasant, who had to suffer sometimes perhaps from her husband's quick temper; but although he was a bit proud, we liked him. You see, it was his business to be like that; when a man is noble, you know----"

"However, some catastrophe must have happened, to make Monsieur and Madame de Merret separate so violently?"

"I didn't say there was any catastrophe, monsieur. I don't know anything about it."

"Good! I am sure now that you know all about it."

"Well, monsieur, I'll tell you all I know. When I saw Monsieur Regnault come up to your room, I had an idea that he would talk to you about Madame de Merret in connection with La Grande Bretèche. That gave me the idea of consulting with monsieur, who seems to me a man of good judgment and incapable of playing false with a poor woman like me, who never did anybody any harm, and yet who's troubled by her conscience. Up to this time I've never dared to speak out to the people of this neighbourhood, for they're all sharp-tongued gossips. And then, monsieur, I've never had a guest stay in my inn so long as you have, and to whom I could tell the story of the fifteen thousand francs."

"My dear Madame Lepas," I said, arresting the flood of her words, "if your confidence is likely to compromise me, I wouldn't be burdened with it for a moment, for anything in the world."

"Don't be afraid," she said, interrupting me; "you shall see."

This eagerness on her part made me think that I was not the only one to whom my worthy hostess had communicated the secret, of which I dreaded to be the only confidant, and I listened.

"Monsieur," she began, "when the Emperor sent Spanish or other prisoners of war here, I had to board, at the expense of the government, a young Spaniard who was sent to Vendôme on parole. In spite of the parole, he went every day to show himself to the subprefect. He was a Spanish grandee! Nothing less! He had a name in _os_ and _dia_, something like Bagos de Férédia. I have his name written on my register; you can read it if you wish. He was a fine young man for a Spaniard, who they say are all ugly. He was only five feet two or three inches tall, but he was well-built; he had little hands, which he took care of--oh! you should have seen; he had as many brushes for his hands as a woman has for all purposes! He had long, black hair, a flashing eye, and rather a copper-coloured skin, which I liked all the same. He wore such fine linen as I never saw before on any one, although I have entertained princesses, and among others General Bertrand, the Duke and Duchess d'Abrantès, Monsieur Decazes, and the King of Spain. He didn't eat much; but he had polite and pleasant manners, so that I couldn't be angry with him for it. Oh! I was very fond of him, although he didn't say four words a day, and it was impossible to have the slightest conversation with him; if any one spoke to him, he wouldn't answer; it was a fad, a mania that they all have, so they tell me. He read his breviary like a priest, he went to mass and to all the services regularly. Where did he sit? We noticed that later: about two steps from Madame de Merret's private chapel. As he took his seat there the first time that he came to the church, nobody imagined that there was any design in it. Besides, he never took his face off his prayer-book, the poor young man! In the evening, monsieur, he used to walk on the mountain, among the ruins of the château. That was the poor man's only amusement; he was reminded of his

own country there. They say that there's nothing but mountains in Spain.

"Very soon after he came here he began to stay out late. I was anxious when he didn't come home till midnight; but we all got used to his whim; he would take the key of the door, and we wouldn't wait for him. He lived in a house that we have on Rue de Casernes. Then one of our stablemen told us that one night, when he took the horses to drink, he thought he saw the Spanish grandee swimming far out in the river, like a real fish. When he came back, I told him to be careful of the eel-grass; he seemed vexed that he had been seen in the water. At last, monsieur, one day, or rather one morning, we didn't find him in his room; he hadn't come home. By hunting carefully everywhere, I found a writing in his table drawer, where there were fifty of the Spanish gold-pieces which they call _portugaises_, and which were worth about five thousand francs; and then there was ten thousand francs' worth of diamonds in a little sealed box. His writing said that in case he didn't return, he left us this money and his diamonds, on condition that we would found masses to thank God for his escape and his salvation. In those days I still had my man, who went out to look for him. And here's the funny part of the story: he brought back the Spaniard's clothes, which he found under a big stone in a sort of shed by the river, on the château side, almost opposite La Grande Bretèche.

My husband went there so early that no one saw him; he burned the clothes after reading the letter, and we declared, according to Count Férédia's wish, that he had escaped. The subprefect set all the gendarmerie on his track, but, bless my soul! they never caught him. Lepas believed that the Spaniard had drowned himself. For my part, monsieur, I don't think it; I think rather that he was mixed up in Madame de Merret's business, seeing that Rosalie told me that the crucifix that her mistress thought so much of that she had it buried with her was made of ebony and silver; now, in the early part of his stay here, Monsieur Férédia had one of silver and ebony, which I didn't see afterwards.--Tell me now, monsieur, isn't it true that I needn't have any remorse about the Spaniard's fifteen thousand francs, and that they are fairly mine?"

"Certainly. But did you never try to question Rosalie?" I asked her.

"Oh! yes, indeed, monsieur. But would you believe it? That girl is like a wall. She knows something, but it's impossible to make her talk."

After conversing a moment more with me, my hostess left me beset by undefined and dismal thoughts, by a romantic sort of curiosity, a religious terror not unlike the intense emotion that seizes us when we enter a dark church at night and see a dim light in the distance under the lofty arches; a vague figure gliding along, or the rustling of a dress or a surplice; it makes us shudder. La Grande Bretèche and its tall weeds, its condemned windows, its rusty ironwork, its closed doors, its deserted rooms, suddenly appeared before me in fantastic guise. I tried to penetrate that mysterious abode, seeking there the kernel of that sombre story, of that drama which had caused the death of three persons. In my eyes Rosalie was the most interesting person in Vendôme. As I scrutinised her, I detected traces of some inmost thought, despite the robust health that shone upon her plump cheeks. There was in her some seed of remorse or of hope; her manner announced a secret, as does that of the devotee who prays with excessive fervour, or that of the infanticide, who constantly hears her child's last cry. However, her attitude was artless and natural, her stupid smile had no trace of criminality, and you would have voted her innocent simply by glancing at the large handkerchief with red and blue squares which covered her vigorous bust, confined by a gown with white and violet stripes.

"No," I thought, "I won't leave Vendôme without learning the whole story of La Grande Bretèche. To obtain my end, I will become Rosalie's friend, if it is absolutely necessary."

"Rosalie?" I said one evening.

"What is it, monsieur?"

"You are not married?"

She started slightly.

"Oh! I sha'n't lack men when I take a fancy to be unhappy!" she said with a laugh.

She speedily overcame her inward emotion; for all women, from the great lady down to the servant at an inn, have a self-possession which is peculiar to them.

"You are fresh and appetising enough not to lack suitors. But tell me, Rosalie, why did you go to work in an inn when you left Madame de Merret's? Didn't she leave you some money?"

"Oh yes! but my place is the best in Vendôme, monsieur."

This reply was one of those which judges and lawyers call dilatory. Rosalie seemed to me to occupy in that romantic story the position of the square in the middle of the chessboard; she was at the very centre of interest and of truth; she seemed to me to be tied up in the clew; it was no longer an ordinary case of attempting seduction; there was in that girl the last chapter of a romance; and so, from that moment, Rosalie became the object of my attentions. By dint of studying the girl, I observed in her, as in all women to whom we devote all our thoughts, a multitude of good qualities: she was neat and clean, and she was fine-looking--that goes without saying; she had also all the attractions which our desire imparts to women, in whatever station of life they may be. A fortnight after the notary's visit, I said to Rosalie one evening, or rather one morning, for it was very early:

"Tell me all that you know about Madame de Merret."

"Oh, don't ask me that, Monsieur Horace!" she replied in alarm.

Her pretty face darkened, her bright colour vanished, and her eyes lost their humid, innocent light. But I insisted.

"Well," she rejoined, "as you insist upon it, I will tell you; but keep my secret!"

"Of course, of course, my dear girl; I will keep all your secrets with the probity of a thief, and that is the most loyal probity that exists."

"If it's all the same to you," she said, "I prefer that it should be

with your own."

Thereupon she arranged her neckerchief, and assumed the attitude of a story-teller; for there certainly is an attitude of trust and security essential to the telling of a story. The best stories are told at a certain hour, and at the table, as we all are now. No one ever told a story well while standing, or fasting. But if it were necessary to reproduce faithfully Rosalie's diffuse eloquence, a whole volume would hardly suffice. Now, as the event of which she gave me a confused account occupied, between the loquacity of the notary and that of Madame Lepas, the exact position of the mean terms of an arithmetical proportion between the two extremes, it is only necessary for me to repeat it to you in a few words. Therefore I abridge.

The room which Madame de Merret occupied at La Grande Bretèche was on the ground floor. A small closet, about four feet deep, in the wall, served as her wardrobe. Three months before the evening, the incidents of which I am about to narrate, Madame de Merret had been so seriously indisposed that her husband left her alone in her room and slept in a room on the first floor. By one of those chances which it is impossible to foresee, he returned home, on the evening in question, two hours later than usual, from the club to which he was accustomed to go to read the newspapers and to talk politics with the people of the neighbourhood. His wife supposed that he had come home, and had gone to bed and to sleep. But the invasion of France had given rise to a lively discussion; the game of billiards had been very close, and he had lost forty francs, an enormous sum at Vendôme, where everybody hoards money, and where manners are confined within the limits of a modesty worthy of all praise, which perhaps is the source of a true happiness of which no Parisian has a suspicion.

For some time past, Monsieur de Merret had contented himself with asking Rosalie if his wife were in bed; at the girl's reply, always in the affirmative, he went immediately to his own room with the readiness born of habit and confidence. But on returning home that evening, he took it into his head to go to Madame de Merret's room, to tell her of his misadventure and perhaps also to console himself for it. During dinner he had remarked that Madame de Merret was very coquettishly dressed; he said to himself, as he walked home from the club, that his

wife was no longer ill, that her convalescence had improved her; but he perceived it, as husbands notice everything, a little late. Instead of calling Rosalie, who at that moment was busy in the kitchen, watching the cook and the coachman play a difficult hand of _brisque_, Monsieur de Merret went to his wife's room, lighted by his lantern, which he had placed on the top step of the stairs. His footstep, easily recognised, resounded under the arches of the corridor. At the instant that he turned the knob of his wife's door, he fancied that he heard the door of the closet that I have mentioned close; but when he entered, Madame de Merret was alone, standing in front of the hearth. The husband naively concluded that Rosalie was in the closet; however, a suspicion, that rang in his ears like the striking of a clock, made him distrustful; he looked at his wife and detected in her eyes something indefinable of confusion and dismay.

"You come home very late," she said.

That voice, usually so pure and so gracious, seemed to him slightly changed. He made no reply, but at that moment Rosalie entered the room. That was a thunderclap to him. He walked about the room, from one window to another, with a uniform step and with folded arms.

"Have you learned anything distressing, or are you ill?" his wife timidly asked him, while Rosalie undressed her.

He made no reply.

"You may go," said Madame de Merret to her maid; "I will put on my curl-papers myself."

She divined some catastrophe simply from the expression of her husband's face, and she preferred to be alone with him. When Rosalie was gone, or was supposed to be gone, for she stayed for some moments in the corridor, Monsieur de Merret took his stand in front of his wife, and said to her coldly:

"Madame, there is some one in your closet?"

She looked at her husband calmly, and replied simply:

"No, monsieur."

That "no" tore Monsieur de Merret's heart, for he did not believe it; and yet his wife had never seemed to him purer and more holy than she seemed at that moment. He rose to open the closet door; Madame de Merret took his hand, stopped him, looked at him with a melancholy expression, and said in a voice strangely moved:

"If you find no one, reflect that all is at an end between us!"

The indescribable dignity of his wife's attitude reawoke the gentleman's profound esteem for her, and inspired in him one of those resolutions which require only a vaster theatre in order to become immortal.

"No," he said, "I will not do it, Josephine. In either case, we should be separated forever. Listen; I know all the purity of your soul, and I know that you lead the life of a saint, and that you would not commit a mortal sin to save your life."

At these words, Madame de Merret looked at her husband with a haggard eye.

"See, here is your crucifix; swear to me before God that there is no one there, and I will believe you; I will never open that door."

Madame de Merret took the crucifix and said:

"I swear it."

"Louder," said the husband, "and repeat after me: 'I swear before God that there is no one in that closet.'"

She repeated the words without confusion.

"It is well," said Monsieur de Merret, coldly. After a moment's silence: "This is a very beautiful thing that I did not know you possessed," he said, as he examined the crucifix of ebony encrusted

with silver and beautifully carved.

"I found it at Duvivier's; when that party of prisoners passed through Vendôme last year, he bought it of a Spanish monk."

"Ah!" said Monsieur de Merret, replacing the crucifix on the nail. And he rang. Rosalie did not keep him waiting. Monsieur de Merret walked hastily to meet her, led her into the embrasure of the window looking over the garden, and said to her in a low voice:

"I know that Gorenflot wants to marry you, that poverty alone prevents you from coming together, and that you have told him that you would not be his wife until he found some way to become a master mason. Well, go to him, and tell him to come here with his trowel and his tools. Manage so as not to wake anybody in his house but him; his fortune will exceed your desires. Above all, go out of this house without chattering, or----"

He frowned. Rosalie started, and he called her back.

"Here, take my pass-key," he said.

"Jean!" shouted Monsieur de Merret in the corridor, in a voice of thunder.

Jean, who was both his coachman and his confidential man, left his game of brisque and answered the summons.

"Go to bed, all of you," said his master, motioning to him to come near. And he added, but in an undertone: "When they are all asleep, asleep, do you understand, you will come down and let me know."

Monsieur de Merret, who had not lost sight of his wife while giving his orders, calmly returned to her side in front of the fire, and began to tell her about the game of billiards and the discussion at the club. When Rosalie returned, she found monsieur and madame talking most amicably. The gentleman had recently had plastered all the rooms which composed his reception-apartment on the ground floor. Plaster is very scarce in Vendôme, and the cost of transportation increases the price

materially; so he had purchased quite a large quantity, knowing that he would readily find customers for any that he might have left. The circumstance suggested the design which he proceeded to carry out.

"Gorenflot is here, monsieur," said Rosalie in an undertone.

"Let him come in," replied the Picard gentleman aloud.

Madame de Merret turned pale when she saw the mason.

"Gorenflot," said her husband, "go out to the carriage-house and get some bricks, and bring in enough to wall up the door of this closet; you can use the plaster that I had left, to plaster the wall." Then, beckoning Rosalie and the workman to him, he said in a low tone: "Look you, Gorenflot, you will sleep here to-night. But to-morrow morning you shall have a passport to go abroad, to a city which I will name to you. I will give you six thousand francs for your journey. You will remain ten years in that city; if you are not satisfied there, you can settle in another city, provided that it is in the same country. You will go by way of Paris, where you will wait for me. There I will give you a guarantee to pay you six thousand francs more on your return, in case you have abided by the conditions of our bargain. At that price you should be willing to keep silent concerning what you have done here to-night. As for you, Rosalie, I will give you ten thousand francs, which will be paid to you on the day of your wedding, provided that you marry Gorenflot; but, in order to be married, you will have to be silent; if not, no dower."

"Rosalie," said Madame de Merret, "come here and arrange my hair.

The husband walked tranquilly back and forth, watching the door, the mason, and his wife, but without any outward sign of injurious suspicion. Gorenflot was obliged to make a noise; Madame de Merret seized an opportunity, when the workman was dropping some bricks, and when her husband was at the other end of the room, to say to Rosalie:

"A thousand francs a year to you, my dear child, if you can tell Gorenflot to leave a crack at the bottom.--Go and help him," she said coolly, aloud.

Monsieur and Madame de Merret said not a word while Gorenflot was walling up the door. That silence was the result of design on the husband's part, for he did not choose to allow his wife a pretext for uttering words of double meaning; and on Madame de Merret's part, it was either prudence or pride. When the wall was half built, the crafty mason seized a moment when the gentleman's back was turned, to strike his pickaxe through one of the panes of the glass door. That act gave Madame de Merret to understand that Rosalie had spoken to Gorenflot. At that moment all three saw a man's face, dark and sombre, with black hair and fiery eyes. Before her husband had turned, the poor woman had time to make a motion of her head to the stranger, to whom that signal meant, "Hope!"

At four o'clock, about daybreak, for it was September, the work was finished. The mason remained in the house under the eye of Jean, and Monsieur de Merret slept in his wife's chamber. In the morning, on rising, he said carelessly:

"Ah! by the way, I must go to the mayor's office for the passport."

He put his hat on his head, walked towards the door, turned back and took the crucifix. His wife fairly trembled with joy.

"He will go to Duvivier's," she thought.

As soon as the gentleman had left the room, Madame de Merret rang for Rosalie; then in a terrible voice she cried:

"The pickaxe! the pickaxe! and to work! I saw how Gorenflot understood last night; we shall have time to make a hole, and stop it up."

In a twinkling Rosalie brought her mistress a sort of small axe, and she, with an ardour which no words can describe, began to demolish the wall. She had already loosened several bricks, when, as she stepped back to deal a blow even harder than the preceding ones, she saw Monsieur de Merret behind her; she fainted.

"Put madame on her bed," said the gentleman, coldly.

Anticipating what was likely to happen during his absence, he had laid a trap for his wife; he had simply written to the mayor, and had sent a messenger to Duvivier. The jeweller arrived just as the disorder in the room had been repaired.

"Duvivier," asked Monsieur de Merret, "didn't you buy some crucifixes from the Spaniards who passed through here?"

"No, monsieur."

"Very well; I thank you," he said, exchanging with his wife a tigerlike glance.--"Jean," he added, turning towards his confidential servant, "you will have my meals served in Madame de Merret's room; she is ill, and I shall not leave her until she is well again."

The cruel man remained with his wife twenty days. During the first days, when there was a noise in the walled-up closet and Josephine attempted to implore him in behalf of the dying unknown, he replied, not allowing her to utter a word:

"You have sworn on the cross that there was no one there."

1832.



THE BIG ENGINE

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By FRITZ LEIBER

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*Have you found out about the Big
Engine? It's all around us, you
know—can't you hear it even now?*

There are all sorts of screwy theories (the Professor said) of what makes the wheels of the world go round. There's a boy in Chicago who thinks we're all of us just the thoughts of a green cat; when the green cat dies we'll all puff to nothing like smoke. There's a man in the west who thinks all women are witches and run the world by conjure magic. There's a man in the east who believes all rich people belong to a secret society that's a lot tighter and tougher than the Mafia and that has a monopoly of power-secrets and pleasure-secrets other people don't dream exist.

Me, I think the wheels of the world just go. I decided that forty years ago and I've never since seen or heard or read anything to make me change my mind.

I was a stoker on a lake boat then (the Professor continued, delicately sipping smoke from his long thin cigarette). I was as stupid as they make them, but I liked to think. Whenever I'd get a chance I'd go to one of the big libraries and make them get me all sorts of books. That was how guys started calling me the Professor. I'd get books on philosophy, metaphysics, science, even religion. I'd read them and try to figure out the world. What was it all about, anyway? Why was I here? What was the point in the whole business of getting born and working and dying? What was the use of it? Why'd it have to go on and on?

And why'd it have to be so complicated?

Why all the building and tearing down? Why'd there have to be cities, with crowded streets and horse cars and cable cars and electric cars and big open-work steel boxes built to the sky to be hung with stone and wood--my closest friend got killed falling off one of those steel boxkites. Shouldn't there be some simpler way of doing it all? Why did

things have to be so mixed up that a man like myself couldn't have a single clear decent thought?

More than that, why weren't people a real part of the world? Why didn't they show more honest-to-God response? When you slept with a woman, why was it something you had and she didn't? Why, when you went to a prize fight, were the bruisers only so much meat, and the crowd a lot of little screaming popinjays? Why was a war nothing but blather and blowup and bother? Why'd everybody have to go through their whole lives so dead, doing everything so methodical and prissy like a Sunday School picnic or an orphan's parade?

* * * * *

And then, when I was reading one of the science books, it came to me. The answer was all there, printed out plain to see only nobody saw it. It was just this: Nobody was really alive.

Back of other people's foreheads there weren't any real thoughts or minds, or love or fear, to explain things. The whole universe--stars and men and dirt and worms and atoms, the whole shooting match--was just one great big engine. It didn't take mind or life or anything else to run the engine. It just ran.

Now one thing about science. It doesn't lie. Those men who wrote those science books that showed me the answer, they had no more minds than anybody else. Just darkness in their brains, but because they were machines built to use science, they couldn't help but get the right answers. They were like the electric brains they've got now, but hadn't then, that give out the right answer when you feed in the question. I'd like to feed in the question, "What's Life?" to one of those machines and see what came out. Just figures, I suppose. I read somewhere that if a billion monkeys had typewriters and kept pecking away at them they'd eventually turn out all the Encyclopedia Britannica in trillions and trillions of years. Well, they've done it all right, and in jig time.

They're doing it now.

A lot of philosophy and psychology books I worked through really fit in beautifully. There was Watson's _Behaviorism_ telling how we needn't even assume that people are conscious to explain their actions. There was Leibitz's _Monadology_, with its theory that we're all of us lonely atoms that are completely out of touch and don't effect each other in the slightest, but only seem to ... because all our little clockwork motors were started at the same time in pre-established harmony. We _seem_ to be responding to each other, but actually we're just a bunch of wooden-minded puppets. Jerk one puppet up into the flies and the others go on acting as if exactly nothing at all had happened.

So there it was all laid out for me (the Professor went on, carefully pinching out the end of his cigarette). That was why there was no honest-to-God response in people. They were machines.

The fighters were machines made for fighting. The people that watched them were machines for stamping and screaming and swearing. The bankers had banking cogs in their bellies, the crooks had crooked cams. A woman was just a loving machine, all nicely adjusted to give you a good time (sometimes!) but the farthest star was nearer to you than the mind behind that mouth you kissed.

See what I mean? People just machines, set to do a certain job and then quietly rust away. If you kept on being the machine you were supposed to be, well and good. Then your actions fitted with other people's. But if you didn't, if you started doing something else, then the others didn't respond. They just went on doing what was called for.

It wouldn't matter what you did, they'd just go on making the motions they were set to make. They might be set to make love, and you might decide you wanted to fight. They'd go on making love while you fought them. Or it might happen the other way--seems to, more often!

Or somebody might be talking about Edison. And you'd happen to say something about Ingersoll. But he'd just go on talking about Edison.

You were all alone.

* * * *

Except for a few others--not more than one in a hundred thousand, I guess--who wake up and figure things out. And they mostly go crazy and run themselves to death, or else turn mean. Mostly they turn mean. They get a cheap little kick out of pushing things around that can't push back. All over the world you find them--little gangs of three or four, half a dozen--who've waked up, but just to their cheap kicks. Maybe it's a couple of coppers in 'Frisco, a schoolteacher in K.C., some artists in New York, some rich kids in Florida, some undertakers in London--who've found that all the people walking around are just dead folk and to be treated no decenter, who see how bad things are and get their fun out of making it a little worse. Just a mean _little_ bit worse. They don't dare to destroy in a big way, because they know the machine feeds them and tends them, and because they're always scared they'd be noticed by gangs like themselves and wiped out. They haven't the guts to really wreck the whole shebang. But they get a kick out of scribbling their dirty pictures on it, out of meddling and messing with it.

I've seen some of their fun, as they call it, sometimes hidden away, sometimes in the open streets.

You've seen a clerk dressing a figure in a store window? Well, suppose he slapped its face. Suppose a kid stuck pins in a calico pussy-cat, or threw pepper in the eyes of a doll.

No decent live man would have anything to do with nickel sadism or dime paranoia like that. He'd either go back to his place in the machine and act out the part set for him, or else he'd hide away like me and live as quiet as he could, not stirring things up. Like a mouse in a dynamo or an ant in an atomics plant.

(The Professor went to the window and opened it, letting the sour old smoke out and the noises of the city in.)

* * * * *

Listen (he said), listen to the great mechanical symphony, the big black combo. The airplanes are the double bass. Have you noticed how

you can always hear one nowadays? When one walks out of the sky another walks in.

Presses and pumps round out the bass section. Listen to them rumble and thump! Tonight they've got an old steam locomotive helping. Maybe they're giving a benefit show for the old duffer.

Cars and traffic--they're the strings. Mostly cellos and violas. They purr and wail and whine and keep trying to get out of their section.

Brasses? To me the steel-on-steel of streetcars and El trains always sounds like trumpets and cornets. Strident, metallic, fiery cold.

Hear that siren way off? It's a clarinet. The ship horns are tubas, the diesel horn's an oboe. And that lovely dreadful french horn is an electric saw cutting down the last tree.

But what a percussion section they've got! The big stuff, like streetcar bells jangling, is easy to catch, but you have to really listen to get the subtleties--the buzz of a defective neon sign, the click of a stoplight changing.

Sometimes you do get human voices, I'll admit, but they're not like they are in Beethoven's *Ninth* or Holst's *Planets*.

There's the real sound of the universe (the Professor concluded, shutting the window). That's your heavenly choir. That's the music of the spheres the old alchemists kept listening for--if they'd just stayed around a little longer they'd all have been deafened by it. Oh, to think that Schopenhauer was bothered by the crack of carters' whips!

And now it's time for this mouse to tuck himself in his nest in the dynamo. Good night, gentlemen!



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